

10

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DOUFU MAYOI

ILLUSTRATIONS BY:
DaiXt
KUROGIN (DIGS)

BLACK SUMMONER

THE EMPRESS RETURNS



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Characters



Kelvin Celsius

Summoner who gained powerful skills in exchange for memories of his past life while transmigrating from Japan. Constantly seeking battle with powerful foes.
Alias: Grim Reaper

Kelvin's Companions



Efil

A half-elf girl purchased by Kelvin as a slave. The perfect maid. Loves her master deeply.



Sera

A beautiful demon in Kelvin's service. Daughter of the previous Demon Lord. Ignorant and knowledgeable in equal measure.



Rion Celsius

A hero summoned by Kelvin who became his half-sister. Has a rather skewed view of what it means to be a little sister.



Clotho

The first monster Kelvin ever took on as a Follower. Its Storage and ability to create materials make it a key player!



Melfina

Goddess of Reincarnation (currently on leave). Refers to herself as Kelvin's wife. Eats a lot.



Ellie

A maid in Kelvin's house who applied for the job in order to repay him for rescuing her and her daughter, Ruka.



Ruka

An apprentice maid in Kelvin's house. Full of energy. Loved by the whole neighborhood. Quite good at fighting.



Gerard

The dark knight who serves Kelvin. Dotes on Ruka and Rion as if they're his own grandchildren.



Alex

Kelvin's huge shadow wolf Follower. Rion's partner. Gets a thorough brushing every day.



Shutola Trycen

Trycen's princess. Currently freeloading at Kelvin's place. Every day is a blast!



Ange

Former Apostle. Now happily enslaved to Kelvin.

The Holy Empire of Deramis

A country that worships the Goddess of Reincarnation. Headed by the Pope. Connected to the Rizean Empire on the Western Continent through Crux Bridge, but is at odds with them.



Colette
Oracle of Deramis. Summoned the Heroes. Her fanaticism makes her a bit sick in the head.



Kanzaki Touya
A Hero summoned from Japan. Lucky pervert. Dual wields. Very oblivious to signs of affection.



Shiga Setsuna
A Hero summoned from Japan. Serious and diligent. Cleans up the problems that Touya causes.



Mizuoka Nana
A Hero summoned from Japan. Partnered with Mun-chan, a flame dragon. Has a comforting aura.



Kuromiya Miyabi
A Hero summoned from Japan. One quarter Russian. Her thoughts are a complete mystery.

The Apostles of Elearis

An organization that worships Elearis as the Goddess of Reincarnation and schemes to resurrect her and bring her back to this world.

The First Seat: Arbitrator
Real name is Iris Deramilius.
Elearis's proxy. Resurrects those she thinks would be useful as Apostles.

The Second Seat: Selector
Real name is unknown.
Only Arbitrator knows his location, but even this info is uncertain.

The Third Seat: Creator
Real name is Jildora.
Possesses the Unique Skill Eternal Return. Has a deep history with Gerard.

The Fourth Seat: Protector
Real name is Serge Flore.
The previous Hero. Defeated Demon Lord Gustau. Possesses the Unique Skill Absolute Gospel.

The Fifth Seat: Analyzer
Real name is Riold.
The real identity of former guildmaster Rio. Possesses the Unique Skill God's Eye.

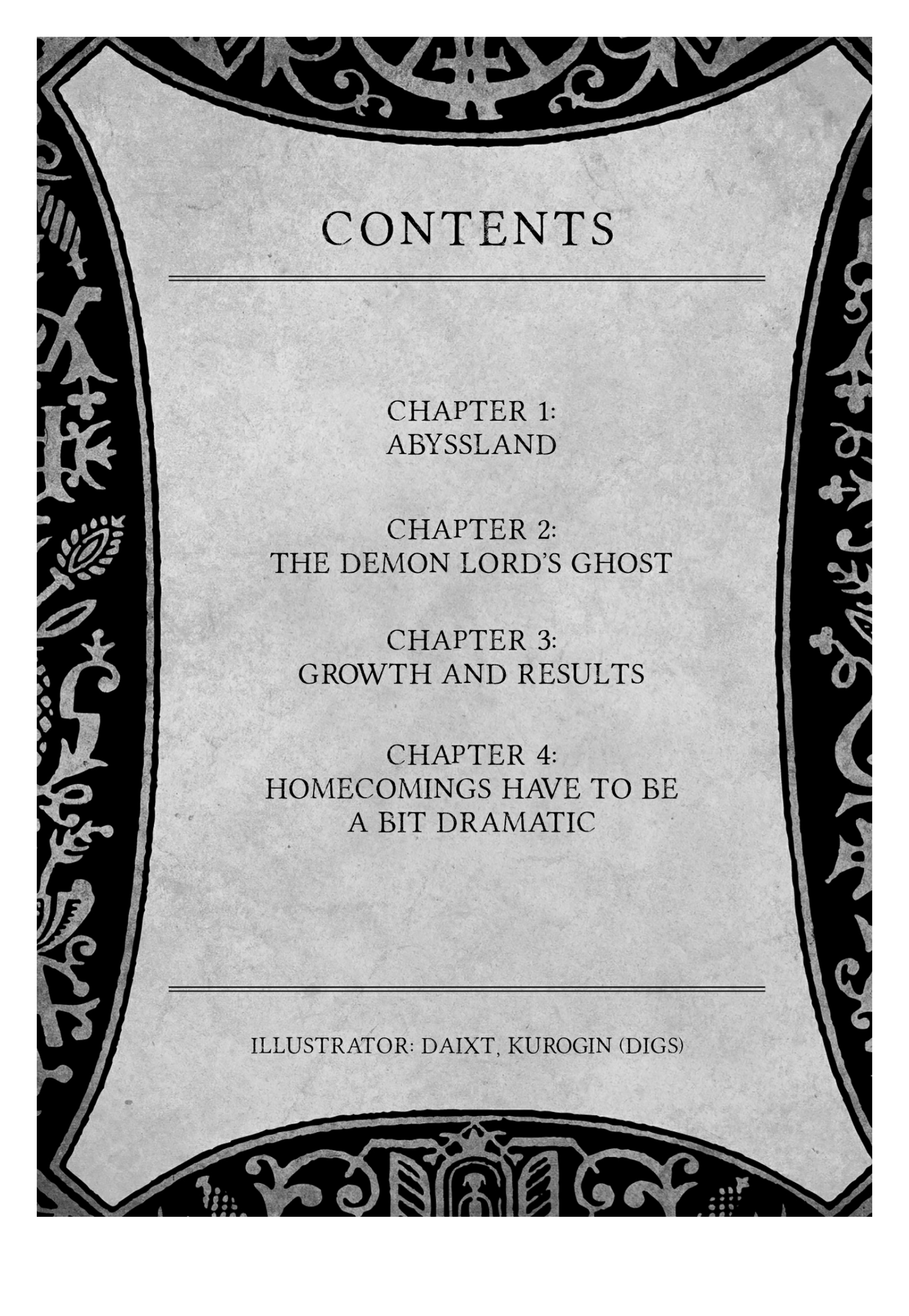
The Sixth Seat: Condemner
Real name is Bell Baal.
Possesses the Unique Skill Color Corrosion, which allows her to manipulate the intensity of the attributes of those she touches.

The Seventh Seat: Reviver
Real name is Estoria Kranweltz.
Currently tasked with protecting Sister Atra while in her Sister Ria persona.

The Eight Seat: Empty
This is the Seat previously occupied by Ange. No one has assumed it since she left the organization to join Kelvin's group.

The Ninth Seat: Survivor
Real name is unknown.
The swordsman who fought Rion in the Beast King Festival. Possesses a powerful ability to survive no matter what.

The Tenth Seat: Empty
This Seat was empty when Ange was a part of the Apostles.



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ILLUSTRATOR: DAIXT, KUROGIN (DIGS)

Chapter 1: Abyssland

When my party arrived in Abyssland, the realm of the demons, we found ourselves in the middle of a desert filled with bizarre purple sand. The portal itself was located within an oasis protected by a barrier that kept conditions comfortable, but the heat hit us as soon as we stepped out. We struck out into the desert as the two suns in the sky beat down on us without mercy. Normally, we could move at breakneck speed and zip through locations with similarly adverse conditions in no time at all, but we unfortunately could not do so at the moment. The drudgery of traveling at normal walking speed weighed down on us as the going got harder and harder.

“Next would be...this side. Please watch your footing.”

One reason we were going so slowly was that we were following the sole survivor of a demon army, someone who knew the least poisonous path through the sand. After Sera lifted Blood Dominion and we negotiated with him properly, he readily agreed to serve as our guide.

What a gentleman. If only his superior could take a page from his book. What? The smile on his face seems forced? I've no idea what you're talking about.

Of course, if Rion went ahead of us, she could purify the poisonous sand and *make* us a path. We didn't want that to happen, however, so I was now carrying her on my back.

I will never let go of this hand! Okay, I half meant that as a joke.

“Ehe heh. Sorry for troubling you, Kel-nii.”

“You sure are in good spirits for someone who's apologizing.”

It didn't take a genius to come up with the idea of relying on Rion's Absolute Purification, and we actually did try it for a while. However, we stopped after giving it more thought. Yes, Absolute Purification did work as expected, and the poisonous purple sand turned into beautiful, pristine white sand in a large

radius wherever Rion stepped. If she continued doing that, however, she would be creating a path directly to the portal. This desert, which prevented demons from invading the overworld with its extremely harsh conditions, would lose its function.

We had Rion try to suppress her ability as much as possible but learned that there was no way to entirely cancel its effects. In short, we had to prevent her from touching the sand. It would get tiring using Sky Walk for the entire journey, so we reached the conclusion that someone had to carry her. Per her request, it turned out to be me.

“Hm, hm, hm!”

Despite how hot it was, I still thought the body heat from Rion to be nothing but comfortable. Of course, we will be completely ignoring the fact that I was barely feeling her chest on my back. It was a small problem that was more than made up for by her periodically rubbing her cheek against my back in the cutest way ever.

Hey, who just called her chest small?! Name yourself!

“My king, are you tired yet? Do you not want me to switch with you?” Gerard asked in an extremely envious voice behind me as he lifted his hands and put them back down restlessly. This was the fifth time he had asked me this question since we’d set off from the portal. It almost felt like once every five minutes.

“You know that this heat and the sun has superheated your armor, right? Do you plan on burning Rion’s skin?”

“Grrr, never have I cursed the fact that my body is a suit of armor more than today!”

There was no way that I would pass Rion to the guy who insisted on maintaining his pride as a knight and keeping his full body armor on even on a blazingly hot day like today. His armor was probably hot enough to fry an egg on at the moment. As such, I did not hesitate in turning him down.

“Wearing black from head to toe isn’t much better, is it? Ughh, it’s so hot...”

“Don’t say that, Ange,” Sera replied. “I read in a book somewhere that it’s hot

only when you think it's hot! It's cool. Yes, if I can convince myself that this is cool, I'll be all good!"

"Sera-san, you're drenched in sweat. It's not good to force yourself."

The heat was starting to get to my companions one by one. Sera was putting up a strong front, but just as Ange had pointed out, there was no way to hide the sweat coursing down our foreheads. Efil and Red Mdo were the only ones who did not look uncomfortable. Oh, and Melfina.

"Everyone, you sorely lack training. Look at me: I'm even carrying Shutola and I'm still fine."

"Sister Mel, generating cool air around yourself is cheating."

"Don't misunderstand, Dahak. I am doing this solely for Shutola's sake. I'll repeat it one more time: this is for Shutola's sake."

"Then the rest of us—"

"Have you already forgotten the explanation given by our guide, Dahak? Drastic changes in temperature would trigger large-scale environmental upheaval. As such, I can only create enough cool air to surround one person. And it only makes sense for that one person to be me, since I am carrying Shutola."

"Ugh, can't really argue against that..."

Although Melfina's explanation sounded overly convenient, her reason was quite solid this time. The second reason we were traveling so slowly was Shutola. The young princess was currently sleeping on Melfina's back, groaning every once in a while. Just before we had set out into this desert, Shutola and Alex had fallen ill out of the blue. We had all been very worried, naturally, and put a pause on heading out. However, it did not take long for us to figure out what was going on, as we had witnessed the same phenomenon happening to the rest of us in the past.

"Who'd have thought they'd both Evolve at a time like this," I murmured.

"It's our first time having so many in our group Evolve concurrently," Efil agreed. "Boga-chan's still sleeping, right?"

I had thought it was about time, with their levels being what they were. Those of us who had Evolved after killing Demon Lord Zel had also been in that ballpark. Boga was obviously going to become the Flame Dragon King, but we had no idea what Shutola and Alex would turn into. I was looking forward to seeing the changes in Boga's and Alex's appearances. Humanoid species rarely changed appearance in any significant way when Evolving, so for Shutola, I was looking forward to seeing what abilities she would obtain.

"Those who are Evolving are supposed to get complete bed rest. Since Shutola isn't my Follower, I honestly think we should have remained inside the barrier until her Evolution finished. But, well, she just wouldn't listen." I sighed.

Efil nodded. "She did say 'I don't want to drag everyone down' before she went to sleep."

"And we rarely see Shutola asking for something and insisting on it. She really didn't think about how we'd then need to go slowly in order to avoid causing undue burden on her body, ha ha."

"You say that, Master, but you looked happy. You didn't put up much of a fight."

"I mean...when a child who rarely asks for something suddenly does, you end up wanting to grant the request, don't you?" *I don't really want to be lumped in with the doting grandpa who is always all over his grandchildren, but I suppose I do get a little bit of how he feels. It's like, when one of the girls asks for something, I really want to give it to them.*

"Princess, are your arms tired yet? Do you not wish for me to take over this heavy responsibility for you? If you wrap Shutola up in cloth and direct the cool air my way, then even I—"

"Gerard, have you forgotten that my stats are higher than yours? Furthermore, I feel like you might start skipping if I entrust her to you, so I'm afraid I have to turn you down."

"Wh— I won't! I'll dedicate the entirety of my attention to providing her with the smoothest and most comfortable ride ever!"

Ah, he's at it again. Yeah, I seriously don't want to get as bad as that.

“Oh, right. Hey, Subordinate Demon.”

“Um, is that my name going forward? N-Not that I will complain, of course. How may I be of service?”

“Is the country once ruled by Demon Lord Gustav close to here?”

“Gustav? Oh, do you mean Redbeard? The one who used to be a Demon Lord?”

“Redbeard?”

“Yes, that was Gustav’s alias. I heard he got it because of his long, red beard. The way it fluttered around made it exceptionally conspicuous on the battlefield.”

“Interesting.” I guess it’s sort of like Sera’s side ponytail. Then again, even though they’re both red, an old man’s beard and a pretty girl’s hair are very different things. Rugged and cute are definitely not the same.

“So, what happened to his country?” Sera asked in a curious tone, popping up next to me.

“Umm, what do you mean?”

“He lost to the Hero of his time, right? What happened to the country after that?”

“Well, Gustav’s nation, the Empire of Grebareika, had half of Abyssland under its control at its peak. After he died, however, other countries slowly chipped away at its land. Now, it’s a tiny country consisting only of the capital and the area immediately around it. The capital was once on the verge of being taken over too, but...”

“But?”

“For some reason, it remains unconquered to this day. Many countries tried to take it, from those with long histories to newly founded ones, but all of them failed without even knowing why. No matter the composition, all armies sent to attack the city ended up practically obliterated. After that, the capital gained a name for itself as the Impregnable City-State, and no country has marched on it recently. Its position isn’t particularly strategically important either, so I guess

countries just don't think there's any point wasting resources trying to take it. There's a rumor that the city is protected by Demon Lord Gustav's ghost. Some claim that it's a swaying red form and that they've seen it."

Demon Lord Gustav's ghost? Swaying red form? Sounds interesting.



We continued trudging through the scorching desert, heading for the closest settlement, as rivers of sweat coursed down our faces. Our top priority was to gather information. Thanks to Sera's Blood Dominion, it wasn't as if we were entirely in the dark, but we still knew far too little about this underground world. *Is it actually even underground?* Furthermore, we had another problem on our hands.

"Uh, you use a different currency here?" I asked.

"Y-Yes, sir," Subordinate Demon replied. "I'm very sorry, but I've never seen the coins you possess. So, this is money from the overworld? In Abyssland, each country issues its own currency. We're now in my country, and we use this paper currency here. There are also villages so tiny, they don't even use money and simply barter for things."

Each country has a different currency?!

Our guide explained that the countries of Abyssland were permanently locked in war with each other, with particularly belligerent nations strongly condemning the use of foreign currencies. Naturally, there was no way to exchange money, and these countries did almost no trading whatsoever. *What a manly way of doing things.* That said, there were some more "peaceful" countries that shared a common currency.

"Is this usable, then?"

"I'm sorry."

Apparently, we should not be showing our overworld money here in our guide's country. He was avoiding looking into our eyes while sweating a different kind of sweat from the rest of us. As it turned out, my enormous fortune was entirely useless in this place. What a predicament. I was back to not having a single penny to my name after so long in a position where I

thought I would never have to worry about money again. We couldn't live like this.

Can we make do with what we have on hand?

By way of food, Clotho's Storage was now overflowing with meat from poisine, a species of poisonous cow we had encountered in Boundless Poison (Efil had already removed the toxic part), and meat from the countless fire dragons we'd killed on our way to the Nest of the Flame Dragon King. If we found a body of water, Sera would surely be able to grab some fish for us, and as for vegetables, we had Dahak—no further explanation was necessary. Efil had already procured a full assortment of condiments such as sugar and salt ahead of time, and I could erect a camping ground wherever I wanted using Adamantite Fortress.

Oh, we actually can live just fine. If we remain frugal, we'll be able to last three whole days.

Of course, even though we were more than capable of being self-sufficient, not being able to eat at restaurants was going to suck. We wouldn't be able to enjoy local delicacies, and sightseeing was going to be nearly impossible. We needed to do something, stat.

"How about selling unnecessary items we have on hand?" Efil suggested. "Doing so would also help clear out Clo-chan's Storage."

"I think we would earn much more if we opened a stall selling your food, dearest sister Efil," Shutola replied. "Even if we set the price a bit higher, we only need one person to buy it, then I'm sure that person will spread the word and we'll have enormous lines in no time. We have plenty of meat for you to use too!"

The two were huddled over abaci, bouncing ideas off each other and predicting how much each would earn. Shutola had just finished Evolving and, having made a complete recovery, was extremely spirited. Alex and Boga were still asleep.

Does the time it takes to Evolve depend on the size of the individual?

"I feel like either method would give us enough money. This time, however,

we might not need to do anything too fancy.” I placed a hand on our guide’s shoulder. “Subordinate Demon, where is the closest settlement?”

“Um...”

“Yes?” I sensed Sera raising a fist behind me, but it was not a threat. She was just preparing to help improve his circulation a little.

“That would be my country’s capital, sir.”

“I see. Look, you’ve been so nice to us, it wouldn’t be right if we don’t help escort you home. Go on, lead the way.”

“Y-Yes, sir...”

In short, I was thinking of leaning on Subordinate Demon’s country for some aid. Although we had annihilated their entire army—except for one—the fact remained that this race possessed the ability to cross Boundless Poison. The head honcho still had no idea what had happened, and for all we knew, he was gathering another force that he would send through to the overworld without our knowledge. Such a turn of events would be no joke, so we needed to leave a bit of a warning. And while we were at it, we could also ask for a token gesture of sincerity.

Um, thinking about it this way, the Flame Dragon King nesting right beside the portal was probably really helpful in preventing such invasions, as he would have incinerated or bitten off the heads of any demons that got through. Oh well. I suppose we can set up something else in his place.



We eventually reached the capital of Doktoría—the name of Subordinate Demon’s country—and found it quite similar to cities in the overworld. The difference lay in a darker color palette and a large variety in the appearances of the individuals walking around. Some seemed humanlike, some looked like monsters, and some were very clearly inorganic beings. As a Summoner, none of it surprised me, of course. At one point, I turned a corner and nearly bumped into a zombie person, and *that* made my heart fly into my mouth, but that was about it.

On our way there, we had encountered quite a few monsters. All of them

were at least Rank B, making them quite powerful compared to those from the overworld. Behind the city walls, however, we also found very weak demons. I had gotten the impression that even lesser demons were at least Rank B, but this was apparently incorrect. Despite their terrifying appearances, these people corresponded to normal, everyday citizens in the overworld. There was a strict distinction made between them and the mindless monsters roaming about outside the city walls. It was extremely confusing to me, as some of them sported truly bizarre appearances.

Gotta make a mental note not to attack first and to check properly if I ever meet anyone—anything?—outside.

“Strangely enough, I see quite a few who seem really humanlike, but no one who looks completely human,” I noted.

“We demons think that the more human someone looks, the more powerful and noble they are,” Sera explained. “And those who look entirely human are pretty much only members of long-standing royal families, so it’s considered extremely rare to see one in person.”

Ah, that explains why we were getting so many stares.

Currently, my party was scattered across the city, with Sera being the only one walking with me. The two of us were wearing deep cowls that covered our faces because we had attracted so much attention that it was as if we were international stars walking the streets downtown. Apparently, even the demons could appreciate Sera as a drop-dead beauty, so I had been on the receiving end of quite a few very jealous glares. Sera herself, however, was not particularly affected by such attention and therefore paid it no mind.

To think she would jump if someone looked at her sideways when we first rescued her... I guess humans really do adapt and grow. Oh wait, not human. Demon.

“You said you had something you wanted to say. What was it?” Sera asked, then clapped her hands together. “Oh, I get it! It was an excuse to go on a date with me, wasn’t it?” She happily grabbed my arm and hugged it.

Wait, your chest— Okay, yep, never mind. I like this. Please continue.

“I’m always up for a date with you, but unfortunately, I do actually have something serious I want to ask you this time.” I turned into a dimly lit alleyway while keeping an eye on the map on the Network. “What did you think when Subordinate Demon mentioned there are people who claim to have seen Gustav’s ghost?”

“My father’s ghost? Well...there’s a chance he might have come back to life out of hatred for his daughter’s boyfriend!”

“Uh, I’m being serious h—”

“There *is* a chance!”

“Uh...” *Seriously?*

“Jokes aside, I don’t really know. After all, I was never allowed to step outside my mansion anytime in my life. Ah! Maybe one of the Four Demonic Generals is still alive and disguising as father?”

“Oh, I suppose that might be a possibility.”

We walked past an unconscious skeleton in a nook in the wall.

“Do you have any theories, Kelvin?”

“I do think there’s a chance that Gustav might actually be alive, though the method is different.”

“What method?”

We walked past a demon buried up to his waist in the wall.

“Well, I also considered the possibility that it’s someone else entirely. As in, not one of the Four Demonic Generals.”

“Someone else? Um, what method and who?”

“That’s— Oh, we’re here.”

At the end of the alleyway was the hideout of one of the city’s gangs. It was the perfect place to get out of the public eye. Not great for a date, but not the worst either, with all the gang members who had been messing the city up all peacefully sleeping like babies. And the person responsible for this scene of carnage was right before our eyes.

“Heave...ho! Here you go; I’ve brought him. It was quite challenging not being seen, with how uselessly big he is.”

Ange lowered a large sack tied with so much rope that it looked like a joke, and made a show of wiping off sweat from her forehead with an arm. Honestly, she did not look like someone who had just handled a challenging job, especially considering the “I finished a big job!” smile on her face. The countless people lying on the ground behind her had clearly had a much more difficult time.

“That’s not a good line from someone who wiped out an entire gang in an alleyway.”

“And that’s not a good comeback from someone who ordered me to do all this. Wait, you were on a date with Sera-san?! That’s so unfair! Unfaaaaair!”

“It wasn’t a date, so put that dagger back in its sheath.”

I thought I noticed the sack twitch a little from the *shiiing* sound that rang out when Ange had drawn her dagger.



The ancestors of the citizens of Doktoria had taken a very unique evolutionary path to adapt to the harsh conditions of the poisonous desert right at their doorstep, eventually developing a natural resistance to poison that protected them even from poisonous drugs if consumed in small doses. Consequently, their race had been highly esteemed as poison tasters and doctors for generations. And yet, during the reign of the previous king, their country had started focusing on developing its military strength.

“We will tread onto the forbidden land and head for the overworld. There are as yet unknown resources, riches, and blessings ripe for the taking!” the king had proclaimed, almost as if he had received a revelation from a deity.

His subordinates had their doubts. However, this was a time when their country had to bolster its military anyway, partly due to the war-torn state of Abyssland and partly due to how few resources their country had, being right on the edge of Boundless Poison. Therefore, the top brass of Doktoria at the time had gone along with their king’s plans, albeit in a half-hearted manner.

They only saw this as increasing the options available to their country in the future.

At the same time, the king had also ordered men to scout out Boundless Poison and find the best path to send a large force through safely. Despite their resistance to poison, even the Doktorians could die with prolonged exposure, and the sand of Boundless Poison was extremely toxic. The desert was actually composed of dozens of patches of sand with varying degrees of potency, so it was the scouts' job to find the least dangerous path.

Furthermore, Boundless Poison was not entirely devoid of life. There were monsters living there, and they ate the poison for sustenance. Everything about them was superior to the Doktorians, be it poison resistance, fighting strength, or speed, so the future army would have to avoid them if it was to have any hope of reaching the overworld. For both of those reasons, charting the path to take turned out to be a long, arduous process. The task had lasted beyond the passing down of the crown and had only recently been finished.

A short while before Kelvin headed into that alleyway with Sera, a minister of Doktorica was addressing his king, a giant purple figure with the top half of a fierce bull and bottom half of a lamia.

"Are you sure about this, Your Majesty? Sending half of our forces on this expedition?"

"I did give my word to my predecessor. Also, this is a good time to be building up our strength in preparation for war, what with Grebareika having lost all its power and the other countries currently in a cease-fire. I'm sure that when war breaks out again, the other countries will ignore Grebareika, seeing as it's being protected by its unidentified ghost. Instead, they will be attacking each other, and that's going to need a lot of resources. We're included in that 'each other,' and we're surrounded on all sides, so trading's not an option for us. The overworld is our only possible source of resources."

"Do you think our previous king foresaw how things would be today?"

"He was someone with ambition and foresight. Many countries have been founded since the death of Demon Lord Gustav, with our Doktorica being one of them. If we do not build ourselves into a superpower, it is only a matter of time

before we are swallowed up by one. Just as Gustav did, I plan on becoming a Demon Lord through conquest.”

“Ha ha, to think that that young Galia-sama has grown up so much. I’m sorry, a bit of dirt got in my eye. Please allow me to step out for a brief moment.”

“Gramps, you seem to be getting along in years. Go on; take your time and wash your eyes as needed.”

After the subordinate that Galia called “gramps” stepped out, the Doktorian king was left alone in his large room. He closed his eyes and cast his thoughts to his past.

“To think the day would come when I would see gramps, the man who has been so strict with me and whom I feared so much since I was young, shed tears. This expedition *must* succeed.”

“Aww, I’m sorry. That’s not happening.”

“Wh—?!”

Galia reacted swiftly to the female voice that suddenly spoke up behind his back. He immediately reached for the greataxe propped up against his throne, having every intention of slicing even the throne in half. However, before he could utter a word, he found his snout gagged and his hands and snake tail all trussed up. Galia could move fast, but his opponent could move even faster.

“Judging by the previous conversation, you must be the king of this country.”

“Mm?! ”

The king had no way to speak with his mouth tied. When he tried to tear the threads off with brute force, he realized that his opponent was far stronger than he was and that, for some reason, he couldn’t feel his tail. The only things he could move were his eyes. Right beyond his field of vision, he spotted what looked like black cat ears. If the situation had been any different, it was a sight that would have brought a warm smile to his face.

“Oh, you felt shaken just now. You did, didn’t you? Gosh, your security was so lax, I seriously thought you were a body double. I’ve always been quite unlucky, so it’s really crazy that I found you right away. Whew, you sure are big. You’ve

got at least three meters to you, don't you?"

Despite her words of surprise, the woman's voice maintained a casual and light tone. At the same time, it was underpinned by an indescribable strength that made Galia break into a cold sweat.

"Oh well, I'm sure I'll manage. Probably."

By now, Galia's entire body was refusing to do what his brain ordered, not just the bottom half. When he managed to look down at himself, he realized he had been stabbed with many needles.

"Just gonna put him in the bag, hoist him up, and make sure I stay out of sight. Yep, totes easy. Oh, wait, but I should do the girly thing and at least pretend that I had a tough time—"

Galia eventually lost consciousness with the voice chattering on right in his ear.



"Okay, that's a cow," I said plainly.

"Yep, it's a cow!" Sera agreed.

"How rude!" Ange protested. "He's the king of this country!"

You say that, but when you opened up your sack, it was a bull's head that popped out. Even if you tell me this guy is the country's king, I can't really tell if you're pulling my leg or not.

"Sera, didn't you say that royalty have humanoid appearances?"

"Not all of them do. And my knowledge is only from what I learned through textbooks."

"Don't worry, Kelvin-kun. Depending on your viewpoint, a minotaur is humanoid! I mean, ones that don't have snake tails, that is."

So the part of him still inside the bag isn't even a bull?! You know what, let's drop this. I won't let it bother me.

"M-Moo..."

"Hey, he won't be able to speak with his mouth all tied up. Wait, Ange, did

you drug him? He seems kinda out of it.”

“Yep. He supposedly has resistance to poisons, right? So I pumped a whole bunch of sleeping and paralyzing agents into his system. Just in case.”

“Dude, ‘a whole bunch’?” *I saw him twitch just now. Was that a survival instinct? Or just a spasm?*

“It’s fine! Your White Magic will nullify it anyway, right? So it’s all the same!” Ange assured me, sounding as if she had planned this out from the start.

Are you sure? Are you really, really sure?! Billy the bull’s gonna be fine, right?!

Still doubtful, I cast my spell. “Benediction Cure.”

Immediately, the bull gasped and came to. “Wh-Where am I?”

Oh, it really worked.

“I told you so.”

“Kelvin’s a bit silly sometimes. Ange, it’s up to us to keep a level head!”

“Agreed, Sera-san!”

“I strongly protest the conclusion you two arrived at! But that’s neither here nor there. We need to have a serious chat with His Majesty here.”

“Sure, do your thing!”

“Kay, ’kay.”

Leaving aside the two who definitely did not think they were in the wrong, I turned to the bull with only his head protruding, which looked quite troubled.

“Hi there, king of Doktoria. Galia Kudo-sama, yes? My sincere apologies for requesting an audience so suddenly and in such an unconventional manner. There’s something I just had to ask for, you see.”

I brought out my staff with a flourish, manifested Death Scythe Boreas, and held the blade at his neck. With a smile, I continued, “Please take responsibility for your attempt to invade the overworld.”

“Take...responsibility? *Who are you?*”

Despite having just regained consciousness, the king of Doktoria returned my

gaze with steady eyes. Sure, I was threatening him in a pretty nice way, but I imagine part of his composure came from him being the king of a country here in Abyssland. Analyze Eye told me that his race was archdemon, which meant he had surely seen his fair share of bloodbaths. I wasn't too worried about him not cooperating, though, as we did always have Sera's Blood Dominion to fall back on.

"I suppose you can consider me an envoy from the overworld who's here in response to your army's attempt to invade us."

"The overworld! So you came from beyond the portal and crossed Boundless Poison? Wait, you're talking like the expedition force I sent—"

"Is all dead, yes. They attacked us at first sight, so we wiped out every last one of them." *At least, our young ones did. As practice.*

I started. "Oh, I'm sorry. To be exact, we did leave one alive so he could guide us to this country. He gave us really useful info, so we haven't harmed him. He should have reached the royal palace by now."

"But that's impossible. Humans besides the Hero possessing such power is unhea—"

"You gotta get with the times, Your Majesty. You can throw a rock and find someone stronger than the Heroes in the overworld these days."

Like me and every other Rank S adventurer out there. Look one tier down and you'll find Azgrad, Dan, Jereol, and even Grostina, the fairy butterfly with poison and an appearance that dealt me equal parts of damage. I'm pretty sure that if I searched seriously, I'd find quite a few more names.

"Someone stronger than the Hero?! No, but..."

"Honestly, Your Majesty, it doesn't really matter whether you believe me or not. The important thing is that your army crossed into our world. They're gone now 'cus we killed them in self-defense, but that doesn't change the fact this was an act of aggression. Claiming that it's how things are normally done in Abyssland isn't gonna help you. We have testimonies from those on your side as well, so you aren't getting out of it. We're holding you to what you've done."

The blade of my scythe dug a little deeper into Galia's neck. He had a thick,

muscular neck that looked as firm as iron, but my blade easily drew blood.

“Hmph, is that your idea of a threat? Unfortunately, we demons don’t sell our souls. We’re all too avaricious for that.”

I could tell that Galia meant it. His eyes were not dead; there was a strong will there, propped up by his pride as a demon or some other motivator. This guy was the real deal.

“Guess you leave us no choice. Sera.”

“Oh, it’s my turn?”

I’m sure that with Blood Dominion and just a little bit of the food Efil had cooked for Mel, we can get this bull king to give us a little allowance from the country’s military budget and information on the surrounding countries. Being the king and all, he’s probably the best authority on the subject around here, right? I’m making this call entirely at my own discretion, but I suppose this would be enough as compensation for what he did. When we left Boundless Poison, I asked Mel to trigger an enormous environmental upheaval by whipping up a massive amount of cold air, completely ruining that “least poisonous path.” Of course, we won’t be so lenient if this country tries the same thing again.

“Wait a minute, what did you just say?”

“What was that?”

“I asked, what did you just say?!”

I had no idea what had brought it on, but Galia suddenly seemed really flustered and was leaning all the way forward, alarm coloring his voice.

What’s going on? This is weirding me out a little. He didn’t even flinch at my scythe just now; why’s he suddenly so worked up? Okay, you’re leaning forward too mu— Ah, I knew it. He fell over. The rest of your body is still tied up inside that sack, so of course you would fall over.

“Who is th-th-that esteemed lady at your side?!”

Despite now lying on his side, Galia somehow managed to roll over until he got a good look at Sera. For some reason, he had even adopted a respective tone.

“Those fiery hair and eyes, that astounding beauty unimaginable for normal demons, and most of all, that sublime name... Are you perhaps Sera-sama?!”

“Uh, you’re being kinda gross.”

Galia was staring up with bloodshot eyes and breathing heavily in a way that, to be blunt, was really disturbing all of us.



“I’m terribly sorry for my unseemly display earlier,” Galia apologized. “I was so emotional that I lost myself.”

Sera shot me a look, but I gestured for her to reply. “Uh, sure. Don’t, uh, worry about it.”

When Galia calmed back down, we resumed talking. We couldn’t very well keep him lying on the floor looking up at us, so we helped him up and let him out of the sack, though we still left his bindings as they were.

“My apologies for my belated introduction. My name is Galia Kudo. I once served as the right-hand man of Reinhart-sama, one of the Four Demonic Generals in Demon Lord Gustav’s service.”

“You were with Reinhart?”

“I knew it; so you really are Sera-sama after all. You’ve grown so much compared to your painting, I just, ughhhh...” Galia suddenly started bawling his eyes out.

Uh, is this guy emotionally unstable? Wait, he just mentioned something very important. Is he saying he was the subordinate of one of Viktor’s colleagues? If I remember correctly, Sera’s existence was only known to a select few. I guess it makes sense for the closest subordinate of one of the Four Demonic Generals to be in the know.

“Sera, do you remember ever having seen this guy?” I asked.

“Nope!” Sera shook her head emphatically.

I turned back to Galia. “You heard her. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Oh, no, please, don’t dig in with your scy— Ow, ow, OW! I’ll explain! Please

let me explain!”

According to Galia, who now seemed like a completely different person from before, he had never met Sera in person. However, he recognized her because his direct superior, Reinhart, had given him a portrait of her.

“It’s inside the small pouch in— Yes, that one. The portrait is inside.”

As Galia was still tied up, I dug through his pockets on his behalf and found a piece of paper that had been carefully stored away. *Uh, is he always walking around with this?*

When I unfolded it, Ange gushed, “Aww, you look so cute, Sera-san! You’re so small and you’re wearing a dress!”

“Oh, this is very well done,” I said appreciatively. “I’ll buy it. Name your price.”

“Wait, no, guys! Don’t look at it! You’re embarrassing me!” Sera wailed.

The portrait was a masterpiece, drawn with a delicate touch that gave it a realism equal to an actual photo. There was no doubt in my mind that the artist was a renowned master.

Even though the expression is different, no matter which way you look at it, this is just...

“It pains me to say it, but this is a memento from Reinhart-sama, so I cannot part with it,” Galia said regretfully.

“No problem, we’ll just copy it, then,” I replied. “I’ll call my little sister over right now!”

“KELVIN!” Sera was nearly in tears at this point.

Okay, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.

Somewhat chagrined at not being allowed to call Rion, I gave the portrait another look. “Still, this is really well drawn.”

“I’m sure Reinhart-sama would be greatly honored to hear that.”

“Hm? You make it sound like he drew it himself.”

“Oh yes. Reinhart-sama drew it himself.”

“Damn, these Four Demonic Generals sure were incredible.”

“Oh? Do you not know? Teaching was also among the duties of the Four Demonic Generals. In fact, teaching was their main duty.”

Uh, teaching?

“We demons generally prefer picking up battle skills, with only a tiny majority being interested, much less proficient, at the livelihood ones. Our food is generally disgusting and entertainment is almost nonexistent. King Gustav simply could not allow his daughter to be raised in such a manner and therefore selected those among his subordinates who excelled in different fields and gave them honorable titles. Reinhart-sama was the country’s greatest painter, Viktor-sama was the country’s greatest chef, and so on. As it turned out, however, they were all also extremely powerful in battle, so everybody eventually stopped calling them ‘the Royal Tutors’ and switched to ‘the Four Demonic Generals’ instead.”

“Oh, right. Now that you mention it, their titles did get changed before I knew it.”

Damn, I never knew how much Demon Lord Gustav cared about education.



The more I heard, the more I understood just how much effort Gustav had gone to to ensure that his daughter had the best education. Never had I imagined the four most powerful demons of Gustav’s army, those collectively referred to as the Four Demonic Generals, had originally been Sera’s teachers. Now that I thought about it, though, it made sense. It was because they were so powerful that they had enough extra skill points to spend on skills not related to fighting. Just as Reinhart, Galia’s superior, had a deft brush hand, Viktor, the demon who had attended to Sera, had been proficient in cooking.

Sera’s only contribution to the conversation was, “The ‘curry’ that Viktor made was really good! Wait, but the ‘curry’ that Clare made was a completely different dish... Oh, well! Both were absolutely delicious!”

Uh, Viktor in an apron making curry? I...can’t imagine it. For all I know, Gustav bullied him into becoming his daughter’s tutor and caretaker. In any case, we

now have a lot of behind-the-scenes knowledge about the Four Demonic Generals. I'm honestly surprised we managed to receive such a windfall so soon after arriving. Maybe it was bound to happen, thanks to Sera's and my combined Luck stat. No, no, I mustn't be overconfident. We're just having an easy time gathering info about Gustav because of how big an influence he was on this land. Of course, we now have to make use of the situation.

"Um, may I ask what your relationship with Sera-sama is?" Galia asked tentatively.

In unison, Sera and I replied, "Lovers."

"Pfffffft!"

Whoa, why'd Galia spit all of a sudden? Ah, it made him cough.

"You okay there?"

"Ahem, ah, ahem... I... I'm fine. Absolutely good."

"By the way, I'm also Kelvin's girlfriend." Ange went to the trouble of pulling back her hood and assuming an extremely cutesy pose.



“Appppptttt!”

Of course, we weren’t particularly hiding it, but I did find myself wondering why Ange thought it necessary to reveal our relationship at this moment in time. At the same time, I also couldn’t help but wish she could express even a fraction of that brashness when we were alone.

Despite having a personality that could be called daring and even eager most of the time, due to her experiences from her previous life, she had a strong aversion to physical contact. It was to the point where I had to work really hard just to hold her hand. I was doing my best not to pry, but we couldn’t very well remain this way forever. That said, whenever I tried to be more proactive, she would turn all red and, probably as a way to hide her embarrassment, slash at my neck with a dagger she kept on her person somewhere. It took serious effort on my part to block attacks from someone whose presence I could not detect. I could manage somehow thanks to the training I got while dealing with the attacks that Melfina threw in her sleep, but we’re talking about me having to be permanently on guard against getting beheaded. Usually, that would be where we then started fighting out of love, which was a development that I always welcomed, of course. However, wanting to flirt with a girl I liked was part of being a guy. As such, I really wanted to help Ange get over her trauma as soon as possible.

In any case, just as Ange had intended—*was it intended?*—she ended up dealing Galia massive mental damage, sending him spitting and choking at the same time. It took quite a while for him to recover.

“Ange...” I shot her a reproachful look.

“I thought it’d be funny,” she replied sheepishly. “And also, I felt like I’d be admitting a loss if I didn’t do it.”

I see. She feels a sense of rivalry with Sera. But okay, we really don’t need things to be funny right now. Now that our lead to the Four Demonic Generals has actually become a hilarious mess, how am I supposed to continue our serious conversation?

“Why is Galia even reacting this way? Hey, man, you okay?” When I checked, I realized that Galia had stopped breathing, permanently stuck in a writhing pose

of agony.

Just how surprised was he?! And boy, this king sure has been rolling around on the ground a whole lot. Well, I can't have him actually dying on us, so guess I'll bring him back with White Magic.

"Sera-sama and a boyfriend...who is two-timing her? If King Gustav were here, we would be seeing a rain of blood—no, an entire country leveled and salted—no, that would not be enough to appease his rage. I can already imagine the torture that Reinhart-sama and I would be subjected to!"

Right after being healed, Galia started muttering furiously to himself, with everything he was saying being very ominous.

Please pull yourself together, Your Majesty. The wound is not as deep as you think. Also, I'm not two-timing.

"Galia, come to your senses!" Sera barked.

"Oh! Sera-sama."

Thanks to Sera's command, Galia came back to us in the blink of an eye. Apparently, Gustav had put the same amount of effort into his men's training as his daughter's education.

"By the way, why were you speaking like Demon Lord Gustav might still be alive?"

"Was I? Oh, how embarrassing. Old habits die hard, I suppose."

"Father was the kind of person who hit before asking questions," Sera agreed. "Viktor got thrown around a whole lot."

"Viktor-sama too?"

Uh, "too"? Do you mean to say the Four Demonic Generals were all thrown around on a daily basis? Okay, he definitely sounds like a bully.

"This might seem like a weird thing to ask, but...you seem really knowledgeable about Sera. Wasn't her existence a closely guarded secret?"

"Yes, it was. Despite being Reinhart-sama's right-hand man, even I was not privy to the fact of Sera-sama's existence. Allow me to explain what happened."

Galia told us that he had learned that Gustav had a daughter only after Gustav had been killed by Serge. Yes, Serge had killed him. The Four Demonic Generals had been defeated after being scattered throughout the lands, but Reinhart alone managed to survive despite suffering a severe wound. After the Hero had left Abyssland, Reinhart had left the crumbling country of Grebarelka with Galia and founded this country, serving as its first ruler.

“Everything we did was for Sera-sama’s sake.”

That was when Reinhart had begun telling Galia, his most trusted subordinate, what he knew about Sera, and first showed him the portrait of her that he now owned. They had founded this place right next to the border of Grebarelka as a place for her to always return to. However, Reinhart had never recovered fully from the wound the Hero had given him and therefore passed away several decades ago. After that, Galia had assumed the throne to carry on Reinhart’s will.

“Oh my god, the Four Demonic Generals all sound so cool, Kelvin-kun!”

“Um, could it be that demons are all actually just really nice people?”

“You can say that we’re really sweet on those we consider family. Although it was for the country’s sake, I did work out a plan to conquer the overworld, so I’m quite far from being ‘a nice person.’ However, while it’s a dog-eat-dog world here in Abyssland, even we demons need an anchor to cling to. And lo and behold! Reinhart-sama’s and my dream has finally come true! Waaaaaah, Sera-sama, welcome home!”

Galia burst into tears once again. This time, though, I didn’t blame him. Emotions that had been suppressed for so long suddenly bursting out would affect demons just as it did humans.

“So, that’s how it was.” Sera drew herself to her full height and placed her hands on her hips regally. “You have done well, Galia! As did Reinhart!”

“Ughhh, thank you so much, Sera-sama!” Galia bowed down before her. It was quite a while before he managed to gather himself once more.

“Sera-sama, this country of Doktorica was created for your sake. Please ask for anything you wish! You can even settle down here if you like!”

“Oh. Nah, I’m good!”

“Guh!”

It was just like Sera to bluntly turn down an offer she had no interest in. Sadly, Reinhart and Galia’s efforts would not be rewarded.

“But that’s because I already have a place I call home. I’ll only be able to come back here once in a while, like a second hometown. Um, is that all right with you?”

“It would make me happier than anything. In place of Reinhart-sama, Viktor-sama, and Gustav-sama, please allow me to say this: welcome home, Sera-sama.”

“Mm, I’m home!”

Ah, I guess he did get rewarded after all.



In a way, Sera was home. However, she still had her real hometown, Grebarelka, and that was where we were headed next, though not before making proper preparations. Couldn’t be too careful, what with the rumors going around about Gustav’s ghost.

Thankfully, the king of Doktoría was more than willing to provide us whatever we asked for. This included financial support in Doktorian currency, foodstuffs, and information. He even offered to cede part of the royal castle to us. Of course, we turned it down—I shuddered to imagine the political repercussions that would have arisen from us accepting. To borrow Sera’s words, “Nah, we’re good!”

Instead, we asked for a prime piece of land inside the capital so that we could set up a temporary base of operations. We were not going to live there permanently, but while we were at it, we figured we might as well turn it into a holiday villa.

“This location is close to the castle and the commercial area, meaning everything you would ever want is conveniently accessible,” Galia explained. “And this might be a nonfactor for all of you, but the public order is good here.

However, um...are you sure you want this place, Kelvin-sama? The building itself has deteriorated quite significantly due to age.”

I waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, it’s not a problem. We can just touch it up.”

The most important part was the land. The state of the residence did not matter, as Dahak would be fixing it up anyway. If push came to shove, I could even raise a new house entirely from scratch. Thanks to the king getting directly involved, everything was getting done really fast. Despite looking like a cross between a bull and a snake, he did surprisingly thorough work.

Everyone, gather at this location on the map!

I sent out word about our new local base through the Network. Before long, the gang was standing together outside the building. Melfina had apparently already begun tasting this country’s cuisine, judging by her armfuls of food.

Wait, where’d you get the money to buy all that?

“I passed by an arm wrestling contest at the side of the road and earned a bit from it.”

“That’s an interesting way of earning money.” *Though we don’t have to worry about money anymore. In Doktoria, that is.*



“However, honey, don’t get your hopes up about food here underground. All the stores are basically just grilling or boiling and then throwing in seasoning at the end. Cooking techniques are very underdeveloped here...*om nom nom.*”

How am I supposed to take your word for it if you’re complaining about food while eating it? Oh, wait, but it’s true that she’s bought less than usual. I guess she really does mean it.

“Hm? Is Dahak still on his way? Did he head off by himself again?”

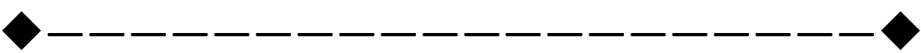
It was somewhat troubling how he would immediately disappear somewhere every time we stopped. *He’s probably off searching for rare plants again, right? Or as he calls it, “improving himself.”*

“My liege. My liege.” Yellow Mdo pulled my robe sleeve.

I looked down. “Hm? What’s wrong, Mdo?”

“From Dahak,” she said, her small hand holding out a letter.

“Why am I getting a sense of foreboding?” I accepted the letter from Mdo, wondering why Dahak had gone to the trouble of preparing a physical letter instead of just sending a telepathic message.

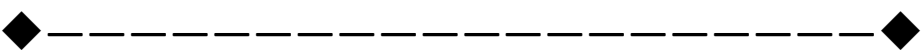


Dear brother,

I’m gonna just nip over and challenge old man Earth Dragon King for his seat. I’ve built up my manliness all for this moment! Boga and Mdo kinda stole the lead, but I’ll be a proper dragon king too when I come back, so please wait for me. Don’t worry, I’ll still continue strengthening myself. And gathering whatever plants I see along the way. Wish me luck!

From,

Your #1 Sworn Younger Brother



I folded the letter back up and rubbed my forehead. “And there’s my foreboding proven right. Just how free-spirited is he?”

As it turned out, Dahak had gone to challenge the Earth Dragon King without

mentioning where that was. It reminded me of the days when Melfina was just “Menu-san” and would similarly disappear on me out of the blue. I would’ve appreciated a heads-up before Dahak actually went off, but oh well. The fact that Dahak called the Earth Dragon King “old man” in the letter implied that the two probably knew each other. I could always check Dahak’s location and condition through the Network. If he ever truly got into a tough spot, I could simply Unsummon him.

“My liege, s’all good,” Mdo said.

“Couldn’t you have told me about this earlier? Dahak explained things when he gave you this, right?”

“He did, but I thought it’d be funnier if I stayed quiet. I don’t regret it.”

“No snacks for you for the next three days.”

“I’m sincerely regretting it! I’m regretting it very much!”

All of Mdo’s personalities were largely the same, but the yellow one was somewhat more curious than the others and had a higher tendency to stick her nose into things. Having a massive sweet tooth was something they did all have in common, though.

“Honey, how could you be so cruel?” a certain goddess asked reproachfully.
“Are you really human?”

Nope, I’m a daemon.

“Um, should I find you a different place after all?” Galia asked hesitantly.

I shook my head. “No, there’s no need. It’ll look a bit drab till Dahak comes back, but I can do the reinforcing myself.”

A few seconds later, the entire structure was coated with adamantite made with Adamantite Rampart. We now had a thoroughly reinforced base, easy and simple.

“I-In an instant!”

“We’ll need to wait for Dahak to work on the detailing, but this should be more than good enough to stay in. It’s all black and dull, but utility is our priority right now. Efil, please set out some of the furniture from Clotho’s

Storage. And a few guard golems too.”

“Understood, Master. Before that, though, I will first give the place a thorough cleaning. Clo-chan, please and thank you.”

The mini Clotho clone perched on Efil’s shoulder quivered a little, then spat out a full set of cleaning tools. This place was a lot smaller than our real home, so Efil would probably finish in about ten minutes. *Oh, the entrance area is already gleaming. Efil, don’t get too gung ho! It’ll get too dazzling to look at!*

“Uh, Sera-sama, is...everyone present this incredible?”

“Well...yep, pretty much.”

“I’m terribly sorry. I do not think I can be of help to you to such a degree.”

I saw Galia visibly deflate. *What’s with him?*

Sera tilted her head quizzically. “What’re you talking about? We really appreciate everything you’ve done for us so far.”

“We basically went from not having a single coin to our names to living in one of the best locations in town,” I added.

“I thank both of you for your warm words. However, these are all minor problems that I am sure you would have been able to resolve with little effort, given your abilities. I will be casting shame on Reinhart-sama’s face if I continue to do nothing. I am entirely embarrassed by how useless I am despite having climbed all the way to becoming an archdemon.” Galia’s tail hit the ground in a steady beat as he racked his brain.

Uh, Your Majesty, cracks are running through the pavement. Even though this isn’t our main home, we don’t appreciate you ruining the road out front. You don’t have to think so hard; you’ve already been a great help.

“Um, Galia—”

“Oh, wait! That’s right! I’ve thought of something that might be of use to you! Sera-sama, everyone, please excuse me for now. Gramps! Where are you, gramps?!” The Doktorian king shot off towards the castle, disappearing into the distance faster than one would expect for having a tail instead of legs. He was gone before we could say anything.

What a busy guy he is, changing from talking respectfully to authoritatively at the drop of a hat and running off in the blink of an eye. I know he's not a bad guy at heart, but he did just leave cracks in our driveway. Will it repair itself?

"Maybe I should extend the adamantite to the front of the house..."

"Master, I have finished cleaning. Sorry, were you saying something?"

"Oh, no, nothing."

I positioned a few knightlike golems out front, then my group walked through the front door.

Ugh, it's so dazzling!



After we were done settling into our respective quarters at the new house, we got together to share the information we had each gathered when we had split up earlier on.

"And I suppose that's about it on the current state of this country and its neighbors, about Grebarelka, and whatever I could pick up that seemed related to the Apostles," I concluded. "I did also ask around about Sister Ellen, but no one knew anything. I'm thinking she probably came to Abyssland through the portal that Sylvia's group took."

Rion frowned thoughtfully with a cute wrinkle in her brow. "And that portal takes her somewhere completely different, right? We'll be leaving the search for Sister Ellen to Sylvie's group, then?"

"We did accept the quest, however," Gerard pointed out, "so let's do what we can."

"That sounds about right." I nodded. "Now, about Sera's hometown, Grebarelka..."

Apparently, at its peak, Grebarelka had been a massive empire spanning half of Abyssland. However, after the death of its ruler, Demon Lord Gustav, the nation broke apart, and the only thing left of it now was its capital. Everyone who used to live there had left, leaving an empty city surrounding an empty castle. Whether it could still be called a country without any citizens or a ruler

was debatable, but it had remained standing this whole time. What interested me most about the place was, of course, the rumor of Gustav's ghost.

"The ghost of the Demon Lord that supposedly wiped out all attacking armies..." I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. "What do you guys think are the chances that Serge struck a deal with Gustav where she let him live but told the world he died?"

"I checked with Galia several times, but he confirms that Serge did indeed kill Gustav," Ange replied.

"I read that as long as a Demon Lord is alive, it's impossible for another to appear," Shutola added from her position on Gerard's lap. "The fact that my father became one is undeniable proof that Gustav did indeed die."

Ever since she had Evolved into a sage, Shutola had started recovering bits and pieces of her memory. Now, she had accepted that her father, the previous king of Trycen, had gone mad and turned into a Demon Lord. Her mental age was still young, but this was great progress.

"I can confirm that," Mel said. "No matter the era, there's only ever been one Demon Lord at any given time. I'm sorry, Sera."

Well, that's that. The goddess has spoken.

"Oh, don't make that face, Mel. I've said this before, but I already found my closure. You don't need to tiptoe around the subject with me. In the first place..."

"Yes?"

"That father of mine would probably crawl up from the depths of hell just to beat up my boyfriend when he hears I got one!"

There's no way that'd happen...right? Hold on. What if Gustav had a skill like Serge's A New Journey? Nah, no way. If such incredible skills were common, this world would be so much more fun. We also have Melfina's word, so it's probably something else entirely, then.

"So, I brainstormed a few possibilities for what this ghost could be. I kinda talked with Sera about it briefly before. Do you remember?"

First idea: the ghost was Gustav himself. Not in the way Sera said, of course. If all fathers could come back to life when their daughters got boyfriends, then I'd have many questions for the Goddess of Reincarnation. No, it would be through a method we had witnessed very recently.

"Oh, right, you were thinking it's Reviver's doing."

"Yep. With Uprising, the Unique Skill she got when she became an Apostle, she would have been able to bring him back as long as she had things that belonged to him, right? She's lost that power now, but Sorondil and Ragat, whom she resurrected with that power, are still alive and well. In the same way, she could have revived Gustav before coming to the overworld, right?"

"I can see it happening, yep."

"I guess it would be fastest to ask her in person, but we did leave her in Deramis to protect Sister Atra."

We had no way to contact Estoria at the moment. I regretted not having given Colette one of the pendants I'd given Touya's group.

"In any case, if the ghost really is Gustav, just be aware that we'll be getting into a fight pretty much right off the bat."

Gerard cut in. "Hold on...Gustav is Sera's father, is he not? Normally, that would be where we see a moving reunion and he heartily welcomes her home. Why would there be fighting?"

"To be precise, it will be a touching reunion that shifts right into him being enraged by me alone. Gerard, imagine if Ruka got a boyfriend. What would you do if she brought him home to introduce him to you?"

"I will erase that scoundrel."

"No hesitation at all, I see. But yeah, that's how it is. You get it now, right?"

I suppose one drawback of being a doting parent or grandparent is the inability to think about what would happen to their relationship with their child or grandchild after killing said boyfriend. They're already punching away before they have time to think about things properly.

The next possibility was that the ghost was someone else in disguise. Sera's

suggestion that it was one of the Four Demonic Generals would fall into this category. One of the very few survivors of an expedition to Grebarelka had described the ghost as a crimson *something* that swayed. This was likely because that person had failed to get a good look at the ghost, either because it was moving too fast or because there was a disguising spell cast on it. In any case, “it was red” was not a whole lot of info to go on. This led to speculation upon speculation, ultimately consolidating into the rumor that it was Redbeard himself, the Demon Lord who had once ruled Grebarelka. That was why, even though it was now called Gustav’s ghost, it could still very well be someone else in disguise, even someone of a different height or gender.

“If this is true, I suspect it to be Bell Baal,” I concluded.

“As in, Sera-san’s younger sister?” Efil asked.

“That’s right, my sister!” Sera puffed out her chest proudly for some reason.

I continued, “I don’t know enough to guess *why* she would be doing something like this, but I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s taken up residence in Grebarelka. After all, it’d be her hometown too. Has she ever said anything about it, Ange?”

“Well, Arbitrator never really restricted where we could go when we weren’t on missions. Just like how I lived in Parth, I wouldn’t be surprised if she lived in Grebarelka.”

So, Bell destroying the invading armies might have been her not wanting her hometown to fall into someone’s hands or just her protecting her territory in general. Either way, if this is true, we’ll have a fight on our hands.

By the way, we still did not know for sure that Bell was Sera’s sister. However, Sera seemed to have already accepted this as fact, so we had to as well. The painting of Sera when she was young, which Galia had shown us, looked exactly like a younger version of Sera just as much as it did Bell with only one noticeable difference. I won’t specifically point out what the difference was, but let’s just say that Sera had been quite well developed at a young age.

The third and final possibility was that Gustav’s ghost was a really powerful ghost completely unrelated to Gustav. Grebarelka was an abandoned city that had been left alone for a long, long time. As such, it could very well have turned

into a dungeon. And if this ghost had really managed to wipe out so many armies...well, it was definitely at Rank S and certainly ready to play. I did not mind things turning out this way in the slightest.

“Heh heh heh...in the end, no matter which possibility it is, I still get to have a good time.”

“Kel-nii, you’re drooling.”

“The real point of this journey is *me* getting home, okay, Kelvin? It would be fun if Bell shows up too, though!”

“What if it turns out to be your father, Sera-san?”

“Good question, Ange! I suppose we’ll just have a lot of catching up to do!”

The image of me greeting her father while battling my nerves flashed through my mind. *I mean, it’d be a battle, but not the kind I prefer. I kinda wanna give it a pass, but I imagine there’d be no avoiding it.*

“I think he’d do literally everything he could to kill you, Kelvin. So you better be ready.” Ange giggled.

You know what? Maybe I actually shouldn’t avoid it.

Our conversation was shifting from serious discussion to just shooting the breeze when a commotion arose outside. Presence Sensing told me it was Galia and a bunch of demons who were probably his men carrying something over. I instructed the golems to let them onto the property, but Galia had his men wait outside as he alone came inside looking for us.

“My apologies for the wait! I’ve come to present you with the teleportation gates we excavated the other day!”

You brought us what now?



I stepped outside to find Galia’s men with two massive oblongs wrapped in huge sheets. Lying on their sides, they just looked like ridiculously huge cutting boards. So that they didn’t catch any more unnecessary attention, I gestured for the men to carry the gates in and then erected a tall wall around our garden using Adamantite Rampart. This was no time to be resting.

“So, these...”

“Are teleportation gates, my lord. It took me quite a while to convince gramps to let go of them. I’m terribly sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“Uh, that’s not what I wanted to ask.”

“Please don’t be reserved! You can think of them as a congratulatory gift from me. I may not know what Gustav-sama would say, but I myself am happy for you and Sera-sama. I hope I don’t come across as too forward in wishing you two a great new life together. Ha ha ha!”

Uh, are teleportation gates something you can so casually give away? Your men look like they still don’t quite get what’s happening. I wouldn’t know, but I suspect the “gramps” you mentioned is the most confused right now. After all, if he doesn’t know about Sera, it just looks like you’ve gone mad. Wait, did you actually convince him to let you do this or did you just force it through regardless? Either way, you sure are a bundle of proactive energy, Your Majesty.

“Again, please don’t be reserved! Our country already has a pair of teleportation gates of our own. What’s more, this pair was discovered by sheer coincidence and has never been used before...as far as we know, at least. My point is, we can part with them and be none the worse for it. I’m sure they will serve you well. You should be more honest if you want something, Kelvin-sama!”

“Uh, I’ve always thought I’m pretty up front about that sort of thing, but...” I see, so I need to be even more honest.

“Honey, I assure you that you’re just like me, through and through.”

Is that a compliment or a diss? Wait, no, we’re getting sidetracked again.

Shutola raised her hand. “King Galia, may I ask a question? Is that teleportation gate portable?”

Oh, good one.

All the teleportation gates we had seen so far had been set up at a fixed location, usually somewhere underground beneath a castle, and were very heavily guarded. Based on what Tsubaki had told us, these gates were thought

to be lost technology from a bygone era. Of course, considering how huge they were, even if they were portable, it did not seem like they would be all that practical to use.

Before Galia had time to answer, Shutola continued, “Normally, teleportation gates are never moved from where they are discovered. They’re black boxes containing the aggregation of wisdom from ancient times, and there’s no telling how attempting to move them would affect their function. Current technology in the overworld is woefully inadequate for deciphering their inner workings. The fact that you had them carried here means they do not need to be set up at a specified place, I take it? So knowledge of how to set up a teleportation gate, including how to fix its axial position and deploy the necessary magical formations, has not been lost down here in Abyssland? If so, can you teach us, please?”

Galia blinked a few times. “Uh...what?”

To set the record straight, Shutola was not trying to pick a fight with the king; this was just how she got when she was really curious about something. Her eyes were now sparkling the way Mel’s did when she was looking at a lavish feast.

The man Shutola had directed all her curiosity towards, however, was suddenly huddling with his men. They were whispering to each other, but I could hear everything thanks to my sharp sense of hearing.

“I thought teleportation gates just worked when you put them on the ground. What was that about a-axial...positioning? Is that all stuff that you have to do when you set one up? The one in the castle works when I charge it with MP. Not that I’ve used it to go anywhere outside Dokia, but still...”

“Your Majesty, I’m afraid I’ve never had the experience of using the one in the castle either.”

“Grrr, so I should have brought gramps here?! He probably knows, right?”

As it turned out, Galia had no idea what Shutola was talking about. A massive amount of MP was required to use the teleportation gates, but this was pretty much a nonissue for him, being an archdemon. As such, he was using them basically the same way I’d used electrical appliances in my past life, without

fully understanding how they functioned. Every time he caught another glimpse of Shutola's expectant eyes, he flinched a little.

"Kelvin, since he's offering, how about we just accept them?" Ange suggested. "It's not like teleportation gates fall out of the sky, and I'm sure having a pair will prove useful in some way."

"Well, I suppose so. Just saying, I haven't the faintest idea how to set them up."

Talk about being out of my depth. Oh, right! Melfina would probably—oh, no, never mind. She just avoided my eyes. I'm sure that she knows, being the goddess, but I guess this is something that'd trigger Divine Binding. If so, even if we accept this gift, it'll be absolutely useless to us. Shutola's the first person I would turn to in this case, but she's already made it clear she's as much in the dark as I am. Hm...

"Let's call for reinforcements."



I used the teleportation gate at Castle Doktoría—Galia gave me the authorization without a second thought—to head to a certain place. I was somewhat worried about whether the other side would accept a request that was literally coming from hell, but my fears proved to be unfounded. I was back in no time at all with someone else.

"So, I've brought a specialist on teleportation gates."

"I am Colette Deramilius, here thanks to the gracious invitation from Kelvin-sama. Your Majesty, King Galia, it is a pleasure making your acquaintance."

"Oh, how kind of you. Same here."

Yep, the person I brought over was Colette. The sight of her in her saint mode felt extremely unnatural, but true to my personal impression of her as an unnecessarily capable weirdo, the secret knowledge she had inherited from her Oracle heritage did include a rather thorough understanding of how teleportation gates worked. Recalling how she had been able to forcefully activate Trycen's gate during the war a while back, I had deduced that she could be of help again here.

On a different topic, I'm pretty surprised that I was able to teleport normally from Abyssland to Deramis. I'm sure there are restrictions in place, but it looks like at least we can travel between Abyssland and the overworld quite easily without having to go traipsing up and down the volcano every time.

"I've heard everything from Kelvin-sama. He told me that Abyssland is the land of his dreams and highly recommended that I come visit." Colette looked around and noticed Melfina in the room. "I see now that he was telling the truth. This is indeed the land of dreams—no, this is paradise!"

"Just how treacherous is the overworld?!" Galia exclaimed.

Everywhere is "paradise" for you as long as Melfina's there, right?! Look at the misunderstanding you gave Galia! That's not even what I meant when I invited you...but never mind; let's move on.

"Oh, yes. Before I forget, the Adventurer's Guild has acknowledged Ange-sama's and Dahak-sama's achievements and officially decided on aliases for them."

They finally get their aliases! This is actually pretty late, considering how strong they are, but Ange did only just stop hiding her abilities not long ago, and Dahak's record only started when he took human form. I'm super happy for them.

Ange threw up both hands. "Yay! Well, truth is, I actually already knew Dahak's. But not mine, though! Was it announced recently?"

"Yes, Ange-sama," Colette replied before looking around. "Oh, is Dahak-sama not present?"

I shrugged. "He's out on a trip to improve himself. We'll pass it on to him, so please tell us anyway." *Getting an alias is a happy thing. There's no point in purposely not hearing it and putting it off for another time.*

"Ange-sama's is Headhunting Cat, and Dahak-sama's is Emperor Greens. Congratulations!"

"Headhunting"? Well, I mean...and "Greens" means "vegetables," right? I can see Dahak liking it.

“Kelvin, Kelvin! Just as I aimed for, mine has ‘cat’ in it! Wearing this hood with cat ears on it all the time paid off! Efil-chan, thank you for sewing them on so cutely!”

“It seems our plan worked. You look very cute indeed, Ange.”

“That’s, uh, a cute name. Good for you, Ange.” *I never knew there was such intention behind those cat ears! And you’re fine with that name?! Isn’t it a bit too on the nose?!*

“I know, right?! I know, right?!”

I suppose all that matters is that she’s happy with it. Alias aside, the black hood with cat ears really is cute, after all. And I know it’s a bit late to be worrying about this, but bringing the Oracle of Deramis here isn’t going to cause problems, is it? Though they’re of differing generations, the Oracle and Demon Lord are bitter enemies, and now I’ve arranged a meeting between an Oracle and a subordinate of a past Demon Lord. Was this really for the best?

“By the way, what is your relationship with Kelvin-sama?”

“I’m his lover—no, his mistress.”

“Appbbbtntttt?!”

“Ah, the king just vomited blood.” *I see. I just have to make myself the punching bag.*



After Galia became unwell and returned to the castle with his subordinates, Colette got to work analyzing the teleportation gates, with Shutola helping her out. The two had apparently graduated from Lumiest, the Academy City, as the youngest valedictorians on record. I knew better than to expect the process to go entirely smoothly, but I still found myself getting my hopes up a little. *Show me what you can do, Golden Sage and Silver Saint! Even though I still have no idea what Academy City is!*

Colette rolled up her sleeves. “So, let’s take a look at one of them.”

“Colette-chan, heelp?” Shutola pulled at the cloth covering one of the gates as hard as she could, but to no avail. “Hnngg...”

Gerard immediately clanked over. “Looks like it’s too big for you, Shutola! Here, let your grandpa help you with that! Heave...HO!” With a hearty shout, he pulled off the cloth in one yank.

The gate that was revealed looked exactly like the ones I had gotten used to seeing. The only difference, if I had to point one out, was the absence of the pedestal for reading the user’s information. It was also lying flat, with the part that would usually be in contact with the ground and therefore out of sight now bare to see. The surface was filled with a complicated array of inscriptions that implied the gate worked through multiple layers of magical circles. Each one obviously held meaning of some sort, but I had no idea where to start.

Colette said thoughtfully, “Thinking about it, this is the first time in modern times that anyone’s had the opportunity to study a teleportation gate. All the countries that own one are scared to have theirs break and therefore only allow researchers to study the surface. That’s why we haven’t learned anything new about them in forever.”

“Dearest brother, may we pleeease take this one apart? I’m sure we’ll never get the chance again!”

Shutola, please don’t look at me with puppy-dog eyes like that. They work on me with a hundred percent effectiveness even though I’m not Gerard.

I turned to Sera. “Do you mind?”

She shrugged. “Sure, why not? We have two of them anyway.”

“Really?!” Shutola cried. “Colette-chan, we got permission!”

“As expected of Kelvin-sama. He displays incredible foresight, as always. This will be the greatest experiment of the century!” Colette exclaimed.

Huh? Am I imagining it or has the focus shifted from analyzing the gate to experimenting with it?

“Let us begin with what we can see. The overlapping symbols in this part alone produce five effects: fixation, dispersion, advancement and displacement —”

“And convergence and reduction, yep. But Colette-chan, I think you missed

the one hiding in the corner. That's concealment, I think?"

"Oh, of course. You really are great at this kind of thing, Shutola-chan."

Before I knew it, the two had entered their own cryptic little world, pointing at various symbols and working out what they meant. *What's this? Decoding? Deciphering? Did they learn this stuff at Academy City?*

"Oh? Are you doing emblemology? Wow, this takes me back," Sera chimed in.

"You know this too, dearest sister Sera?"

"I learned it when I was small. My tutor, Reinhart, drew them so beautifully that I got completely hooked on them for a while. I'm not bad at memorizing things, but trying to draw these entirely from memory was *hard*. Oh, that one over there isn't only dispersion, it can also be used to mean mana and variation, though it might just be an Abyssland thing."

Shutola and Colette looked extremely surprised, but I was even more startled than they were. *How is Sera able to join this conversation of the geniuses so naturally?! Isn't she the type who relies solely on intuition and just lives day-to-day?!*

"How about this one?" Shutola pointed to a different part of the frame.

Sera peered closer. "It looks like three rings, but this line's thicker here, right?"

"I see." Shutola's eyes widened. "With that in mind, and because this part is here, does that make it a completely different symbol—"

Oh, right. I keep forgetting because Sera's almost supernatural intuition shines through so often, but she's actually an intellectual genius too. She comes up with brilliant ideas when helping me with my golem hobby and does mental math in a split second when helping Efil with our household finances. Clearly, the gifted education that Gustav arranged for her paid off. If I'm to sum up what happened here in a single sentence, it would be: Sera has joined the researchers' party!

When I looked around, I realized once again just how impressive the lineup of this group was. First, there was Colette, the saint who had inherited secrets

imparted by the gods. Second, there was Shutola, who was probably humanity's top intellect. Third, there was Sera, the genius demon who, before I knew it, had put on a lab coat and glasses.

Dare I believe they can actually pull this off?

"Hm, okay...right...this would be... Kelvin-sama!" Colette cried.

"Yes?!" My voice broke a little due to the surprise from being called all of a sudden. *My humble illiterate self won't be able to contribute in any way, you know.*

"Three days! Please give us three days! We promise to thoroughly figure out how the teleportation gate works within that time!"

"Please, dearest brother!" added Shutola. "We'll give it all we've got!"

"Kelvin, just wait for us!" Sera added.

"Uh, sure. Yeah, go for it."

The three were so vehement that I ended up saying yes. *No, that's not the way to think about this. If a few days is all that's needed to make a world-shaking discovery, then saying no is not an option. Oh man, what should I do when they figure out how to make and set up a teleportation gate? Should I have one installed underneath my house?*

"Master, if they are going to be working for three days, leaving them outdoors for all that time is somewhat..."

"That's a fair point. I'll make a proper room for them. Hold on, you three! I'm gonna revamp the house a little. Clotho, put the two gates into your Storage for now."

"Noooo, Clotho, give us just a moment! We're at a good point!"

"Clotho, stay! Wait!"

The slime froze with its mouth opened large enough to swallow the teleportation gates. Despite not being able to make facial expressions, I could feel it giving me a very troubled look.

Man, even I don't know what to do here.



Chapter 2: The Demon Lord's Ghost

While the research team was doing their thing, I didn't really have anything to do. However, I was not one to just twiddle my thumbs doing nothing. More correctly, I would die from boredom. Melfina and Mdotharak were doing a food tour of the city while complaining every step of the way, but I knew better than to go with them. My stomach was not lined with steel, was not the void of space, and was not another dimension.

"Kelvin-kun, come on! It's this way!"

"We have plenty of time, so what's the hurry? You remember that your base Agility is higher than mine even when I'm buffed with Sonic Acceleration, right?"

In contrast to me, clad in wind and running pretty seriously, Ange was running backward while smiling at me. She was dodging everything in her way as if she had eyes in the back of her head and wasn't sweating even a drop. We had been in this strange formation the whole time since leaving Doktor, somehow chatting face-to-face despite running at breakneck speed. Ange was clearly going easy on me based on the way she was running, but I was not closing the distance at all.

We were currently heading to what was left of the Empire of Grebareika, its capital, as we figured that we might as well use our free time to do a little scouting. The larger our group, the more conspicuous we would be, so we were doing this with just the two of us. If push came to shove, I could always Summon more reinforcements.

"I'm just excited 'cus it's been so long since we got to hang out alone! I've been looking forward to this so much. It's pretty much a, uh, a date, right?"

A reconnaissance date?! Such a thing exists?! All right, jokes aside, I confess I've been feeling quite self-conscious this whole time too.

"I suppose it is a date!"

“Yay!”

Ange flashed me a smile beautiful enough to make me fall for her all over again while skillfully beheading the monster charging at her back. *If you thought her back was her blind spot, think again. Oh, I’m sorry, you don’t have a head anymore.*



Most of Doktoria was either desert or extremely dry, arid land. Two scorching suns hung in the sky, generating mirages that reflected scenery from far away. My sweat was flowing nonstop. I had spent the past few days traveling through pretty hot places. As someone wearing black, a color that absorbs heat, from head to toe... *No, Ange’s also wearing black and she’s having such an easy time, she’s even enjoying the scenery while running backward. If I let myself complain, I’m not a man!*

“Ah.” Ange suddenly stopped.

“What?”

“Isn’t that the border? Look, the climate’s different.”

“Oh wow, it’s so drastic. So that’s how a country border in Abyssland looks.”

We were looking at a very clear line where the dry land of Doktoria suddenly gave way to an open plain with luxuriant grass dotted by verdant trees. The border between the two was a band several meters wide that looked like a chaotic blend of the two. A closer look revealed that the line itself was constantly moving.

“Pretty weird how even though the width of the line is fixed, it keeps moving back and forth,” I marveled. “Reminds me of the waves at a beach.”

In Abyssland, the size of a country was tied to its strength. This was also true in the overworld, but down here, the relative strengths of neighboring countries were actually visible from their physical borders.

These borders were a bizarre phenomenon unique to this land beyond the view of Melfina as the goddess managing this world. Were they put here to intentionally provoke the demons into fighting each other? Were they a natural

anomaly caused by the thick mana in the air? No one knew how they worked, but one thing was clear: they were affected by the influence of those with power in Abyssland, which could mean individuals with overwhelming fighting strength as well as those with authority like kings. Prominent examples of the former were the dragon kings. Of course, dragon kings could also enter someone else's service, so things were not so clearly defined. Basically, this was just a general idea of how the borders worked, and no one understood them fully.

Within a country's borders, the climate was altered to best suit the person influencing the phenomenon. If we took Galia as an example, that was arid land. Grebarelka, from what I could see, actually had a variety of biomes besides plains. *I wonder what climate it would be if it were a human country? Nah, never mind.* Now, if a territory belonged to an individual, then there was no problem if that land turned into a climate that suited them. Things were a lot more complicated with countries, however. Depending on how extreme the climate became, other races would be unable to live there.

"Doktoria has things pretty hard," Ange explained. "Its hot climate is suitable for both the current and previous kings, Galia and Reinhart, but it has a large variety of races among its citizenry, many of whom came here with the two when Grebarelka collapsed. Grebarelka had a lot of different climates, and that was a large part of how it managed to be a place where so many races lived together, but the same can't be said of Doktoria. The only reason it's still standing strong is because of the hard work and management skills of Reinhart and Galia. At least, that's the prevailing opinion in the country."

"You managed to kidna—*ahem!*—arrange an audience with the king for us *and* gathered so much info in such a short time? You really are incredible, Ange. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"I wasn't the former spy of a goddess for nothing. Feel free to rely on me even more, Kelvin-kun!"

Ange was completely in older sister mode. If it had been someone else, I might have warned them not to get overconfident. But I knew I didn't have to do that with Ange; that was how much I trusted her. I was sure that if I actually said I wanted to take over Abyssland, she would readily hand me the land by

assassinating everyone of importance.

“You’re already a huge help to me. But getting back on topic...it’s rare for countries in Abyssland to have citizens of varying races?”

“Aside from Doktoria, most countries are formed by races with similar preferences in climate banding together. There’s no reason for demons to force themselves to live under conditions they’re adverse to, after all. It’s not impossible for nations to agree to be peaceful with each other, but when war breaks out, it’s a very literal push and pull of ecosystems. Demons are quite warlike by nature, and the larger a nation, the more land it wants. Add to this the fact that all the land they win is automatically converted into their preferred climate and you get, well, the current state of affairs.”

“It’s almost like this place is designed to make the demons fight each other.”

Hmm, if Melfina is managing the overworld, who’s managing Abyssland? An evil deity, maybe? Ah, is there a possibility that Elearis has usurped this evil deity’s place? Let’s ask Melfina-sensei when we get back.

“Leaving aside the difficult talk, shall we cross the border?” I suggested.

“Sure thing. Hey, you know what? Let’s try jumping over it!”

Oh? I remember seeing that somewhere!

“It’s only a few meters across, so we should make it just fine. Okay, let’s do it! Oh, since we’re at it, wanna do it holding hands?”

“Huh?! Um, I, whaaaaat...” Ange blushed faintly. “S-Sure, I guess.”

Yes! So she’s gotten comfortable enough with me to hold hands without trying to behead me as a way of hiding her embarrassment. It’s a small step, but great progress. That’s right, we’re steadily making headway. My goal is to keep making advances on Ange every chance I get on this date. It’s the perfect opportunity, as I don’t have to worry about collateral damage if I accidentally push her too far and she goes berserk. What? If we break out into a fight, it’d make us way too conspicuous and ruin this reconnaissance mission? You idiot! We can just turn this from a reconnaissance date into a battle date! Of course, if Gustav is really here, we’ll have to make sure we run away before he notices us.

“Okay, let’s go. You ready, Ange?”

“Let me do the countdown. Three, two, one...jump!”

“Jump!”

We held hands tightly and leaped through the air. Ange was by far my superior when it came to physical ability, but she was holding back to match my jumping power. Even so, we easily cleared the border even without doing an approach run. With a soft *poof*, our feet landed on the grassy plain on the other side.



First in Grebarelka! Never mind, stupid joke. Wait...hmm?

“Uh, did it suddenly get really dark?”

“Kelvin, look up! The two suns disappeared and were replaced by a big red moon!”

Having two suns in the sky was weird enough for an underground world, but now there was a red moon above us. It seemed the change in climate affected not only the land, but also the day and night cycles.

“The sky and stars also seem faintly red,” I noted. “And that shade...”

“Looks like blood.”

“Totally does.” Reminds me of Sera’s Blood Dominion. Is this sky even real? We aren’t gonna eventually find out it’s just a projection made with really high-level magic, ri— On second thought, I can sort of imagine it happening, what with this being Abyssland. All right, before anything else...

“Kelvin, let’s jump it again!”

“You bet!”

We gotta fully enjoy the sensation of crossing between climates!

“So bright!”

“So hot!”

Ange and I spent a while just going back and forth between Doktoría and Grebarelka.

Reconnaissance mission? No, no, this is a reconnaissance date.



“RAWRRRRRR!” The crowd of lizard-like monsters with green scales that we were facing howled at the top of their lungs. Appearance-wise, they looked like the lizardmen in the overworld, but their size and power were on a whole other level. The sight of us killing others of their group did nothing to discourage them from rushing at us with swords, spears, and weapons they were actually very proficient at wielding. There was even a proper chain of command, with there being a commander in the middle of the pack who directed the rest to move

like a real army unit.

According to Analyze Eye, these guys were called malice garrison lizards. I wasn't quite sure what to make of the name, but there was no doubt they were strong. Considering their stats, I would peg them as Rank A by overworld monster standards. Upper Rank A, even.

Ange, five reinforcements heading your way. Three spears, one bow, one staff.

While slicing and dicing with Mad Holy Sword Clive, I continuously used Parallel Processing to keep an eye on the situation as a whole. It might have been uncalled for, considering Ange's superior detection abilities, but we were still very much developing our teamwork skills, and I figured there was no harm in trying various things.

::Again? How many have come out of that hole in the ground by now? Want me to finish off the malice garrison commander and cut off their chain of command?::

No, hold on. That'd be a waste.

::I knew you'd say that. Gotcha; let's take our time with this, then.::

Ange charged in with a dagger in one hand, making a beeline for a group of three spear-wielding monsters. Using a fraction of her top speed, she closed in like a passing gust of wind. I suspected the lizards couldn't see her, but they had sharp instincts. Be it due to that or simple Danger Detection, they actually managed to thrust their spears at Ange's position.

::Oh, they're using pretty good stuff.::

Of course, not only did Ange dodge the attack, she even had time to appraise them. Something rolled on the ground right after that, but we don't really have to explain what it was, do we? Yep, it was the usual.

The archer and mage in the back had either expected their comrades to fall or were fully intending to hit them too, as they were already in the middle of launching their own attacks. However, the moment the projectiles were unleashed, their heads also left their bodies.

Uh, was Assassin a class meant for frontal combat like this?

::Kelvin-kun, there are ten m— Wow, they're being really generous. Thirty more are joining the fight all at once. You feel like using magic yet?::

That would be best for killing all of them in one go, but close-quarters combat is good enough for monsters of this strength.

I kicked the closest lizard to me into the fresh wave of reinforcements in lieu of a greeting, then charged in. Just as Ange had pointed out, it would be much faster to annihilate them using magic. And my lower Strength and Endurance stats made me quite unsuitable fighting in close quarters.

However—and this was a big one—we would presumably be meeting Gustav's ghost soon. If my guess was right, it was actually Gustav, Sera's dad, the previous Demon Lord. As soon as I introduced myself and told him what I was to Sera, chances were very high that he would start swinging at me, kicking off a very real life-and-death battle. As such, this fight with the lizards was meant to serve as a dry run for me. My physical stats were on the lower end, so I had to make up for it with techniques polished through real battle. I aimed to make each strike sharper and more refined, improving a tiny bit each time.

::I can tell by looking, but...it's been around half an hour since we started fighting these monsters. I think we're raising a pretty big commotion. Are we giving up on being stealthy?::

I've got a Silent Whisper barrier up, so sound is the one thing we don't have to worry about.

::Thorough as ever, I see. But you know what, Kelvin-kun?::

Yeah?

::You're supposed to be on a date with *me* right now.::

A long chain appeared from the sleeves of Ange's outfit, clinking softly. I recognized it as the chain from the Explosive Talisman Binding Chain Sword that we had developed together, but what was at its ends were no longer swords or talismans. Instead, they were fist-sized weights.

Wait, don't tell me you're gonna...

::Faster! And more efficient! That's our motto!::

The explosive sound of air being forcefully ripped apart slammed into my ears as the two ends of Ange's chain shot forward. The lumps of iron on their ends gouged and crushed whatever they came into contact with, practically making the monsters explode with a mere graze. Ange controlled her weapon with hands still hidden inside her long sleeves, deftly using the extra heavy weights like they were whips with variable lengths to build a literal mountain of corpses. The monster army crumbled in no time at all, with the variant in the back, the malice garrison commander, finally getting its head caved in. To finish, Ange threw her two weights into the nest the monsters had come from. The furious attack smashed into the structure with such force that it caved in.

::Hmm, the kunai knife is faster, but this is better against enemies I can reach easily. I'll call it Crushing Weight. Yep, I'll definitely be using this in battle!::

My practice targets...

Getting beheaded was pretty savage, but the scene of carnage before my eyes was quite ghastly in its own way. Corpses lay strewn everywhere, many of them mangled beyond recognition. Thanks to the new weapon that I had thought was too big and heavy to be used in secret, my plan was entirely ruined.

"Kelvin-kun." After swinging off the blood plastered onto the weights and returning the chains to the inside of her sleeves, Ange turned to me and called my name—not through telepathy, but with her actual voice. "I would normally overlook this, but if all you're thinking about while on a date with me is another woman—and not even the woman herself, but how to greet her dad—then even I would get jealous, okay? It makes me feel terrible."

She gave me a disarming smile while holding a dagger in one hand. An instant later, she was standing right in front of me, her extremely poisonous blade touching my neck.

Do your best, Goddess's Ring! Seriously! Please! I beg you!

"I'll keep that in mind, ma'am!"

"Good!"

Apparently, being a super elite spy meant that Ange could read my mind. I

could really do without a second Melfina, but there wasn't much to be done about it.

After our little spat—*yay, I got out of it without losing a limb!*—we continued making our way to the capital of Grebareika, bumping into more groups of monsters on the way.

“I feel like the closer we get, the stronger the monsters are. Is there even a need for the ghost to show up? The monsters alone could probably wipe out most armies.”

“As expected of the seat of power of the previous Demon Lord. But you know what, Kelvin? Most armies—and most people, for that matter—wouldn't proactively charge at all the monsters they see.”

“Ha ha ha, what're you talking about? It's a totally natural human instinct.”

Everyone has times they can't control themselves. Like Melfina sitting at a table loaded with food, Efil standing in a kitchen, and Gerard being in the same room as his grandchildren. Wait, uh...I'm sure they do. Depending on the time and place? Maybe.

Ange sighed. “I guess this is also on me for falling in love with you knowing what you're like. By the way, you went back to Deramis to fetch Colette, right? When you were there, did you stop by the orphanage to ask Estoria about Sera-san's dad? She should know best whether she actually revived him or not, right?”

“Yep, I did ask.”

“You did?! Well, how'd it go?”

“Honestly, I can't tell how much I can believe what she said.”

“What do you mean? You think she was lying?”

“No, not lying. How do I put it? Hmm...Estoria completely turned into Sister Ria.”

“What?”

“In short, she's lost her bewitching, sexy vampire persona entirely. Her mind's now fixed into that of a clumsy nun.”

“I...see.”

Estoria had lived her whole life acting out various personas to suit those around her. Previously, her bewitching personality had appeared to be her main frame of mind, but that was gone now, replaced entirely by her Sister Ria self. She was more than happy to tell me what she knew about Gustav’s revival, but I actually had more difficulty believing her words as Ria. She kept using “maybe,” “I think,” “I’m sure that,” and other similar qualifiers as if even she herself wasn’t sure of what she was saying.

Is she gonna be able to protect Sister Atra when the need arises?

According to Ria herself, she had resurrected Gustav at some point in the past. However, she didn’t sound entirely sure, and she couldn’t remember where and when she had done it, nor what state he was in. Our conversation basically went like this:

“Umm...it’s like, I think I didn’t not resurrect him before coming to the overworld? Maybe?”

Can you not answer my question with a question? And is that a yes or a no?

“And also, um, can we keep this between us? At the time, I was, sort of, really keyed up, you could say? So I don’t really remember it well. And now, it’s like Ria is my real self, so, how should I put it? I’m not very confident about what I did and who I was as Estoria, I guess you could say? I’m not even sure if it was Gustav that I resurrected.”

Did she end up like this because of how much she loves Gerard? Good for you, Gerard. Look how loved you are. Hmm, but at this rate, I’ll be returning to Abyssland without anything particularly useful.

“Can I trouble you to try reverting to Estoria?”

“I-I’m not confident, but okay. Let me just breathe in...breathe out...”

Do you have to breathe that deeply? I can’t tear my eyes aw— Oh, wow, physics is great.

“Oh, my? You still want to talk with this version of me? Honey, you sure are an odd—noooooo, this is so embarrassing! Why was I wearing such revealing

clothing back theeeeen?!"

Ah, this isn't working. She's back to being Ria.

"Wait, oh no! I forgot to take in the laundry! If I don't hurry, Mother Marigan will scold me! If I don't ask Sister Atra to help, it'll be too late!"

Unfortunately, it suddenly started raining, which brought our conversation to an abrupt end as Ria dashed off to take in the laundry that had been hanging outside. While watching the vampire wearing a nun habit desperately bustling to and fro in the rain, I thought to myself, *Aren't vampires supposed to be weak to running water?* But then I recalled that she had been able to use White Magic too and figured she had probably just overcome all her weaknesses upon becoming queen of the vampires.

So, yep, that was pretty much how things had gone. Consequently, I figured I had to confirm everything myself.

"Wow, going off my past interactions with her, I can't imagine Reviver being like that. I guess love really does change people. Of course, even if her personality changes, her fighting strength should remain the same, so I think we can still rely on her to protect Sister Atra. I can imagine Condemner's speechless face when she finds out, though. The two were like cats and dogs."

"Ah, yes, Sera's 'maybe' sister. Were they *that* bad with each other?"

"I wouldn't say they hated each other's guts, but they were pretty much arguing every time I saw them together."

Right, she was short-tempered when we met her in Gaun too. I guess some people just rub each other the wrong way. Estoria's past personality probably had its own quirks too. But, hmm...

"If the two were on such bad terms, why would Estoria help revive Bell's father?"

"It's our job to find out, right?"

"That's one way of putting it."

Estoria easily fell in love with people, and she'd apparently really loved Gustav in the past. Maybe...nah, no way.

After meeting—charging into—two or three more groups of monsters, Ange and I finally spied the capital of Grebarelka on the horizon. It was surrounded by a moat filled with a red liquid that made me think of the furnaces of hell. The pitch-black walls surrounded a city entirely devoid of life, having been left abandoned for who knew how long. In the center of everything was an ominous castle that clawed at the sky, surrounded by flocks of bats—this was clearly the Demon Lord Castle. I was very impressed by how much effort Demon Lord Gustav had gone to to follow conventions.

“The capital’s come into view,” Ange announced. “At the height of Gustav’s power, that city was the literal heart of Abyssland. It was even called Grebarelka the Demonic Capital at the time. And now no one can get in.”

“The ghost that makes sure of it is nowhere to be seen, though.”

“What do you want to do? Should we head straight in—GET DOWN!”

“*Nguh?!?*”

Ange caught me by surprise, grabbing the back of my head with her godlike speed and pushing it down into the grassy ground. Apparently, someone was feeling frisky—no, that wasn’t it.

Is it the ghost?

::Maybe. Look. On top of the castle wall.::

The natural way I switched to using telepathy was perhaps a sign of how much I had gotten used to moving covertly. Thankfully, the grass was quite tall, and we could hide ourselves completely just by lying down. I now had a lot of dirt on my face, but yep, it was for camo purposes. That was definitely the reason Ange had pushed me down.

::Kelvin?::

Yep, I see it.

Jokes aside, when I squinted, I did indeed see *something* red on top of the wall where Ange was pointing. I wasn’t joking when I called it “something.” It only barely appeared humanoid and was enveloped in a red haze of sorts that made it impossible to determine any other details. We were so far away that I

couldn't accurately gauge its size either. "Ghost" was a very apt description. I regretted not having borrowed Farsight from Efil.

::That's the stance of a man, I'd say,:: Ange told me.

You can tell?

::Of course I can, though it's possible the ghost is purposely adopting that stance as a subterfuge.::

Ugh, sorry, I can't see it.

::It's really a sense you train over time.::

I highly doubted training would help, considering the distance and haze. I couldn't even tell if it was moving, let alone its stance.

::So then, what *do* you want to do? Any closer and the grass gets too short to hide in. If we keep going, there's a chance the ghost might spot us.::

If it were up to me, I'd like to just stride right on in, I replied. *However, since this is a date, I think it's about time we headed back.*

::Oh? You sure?::

Why do you look so surprised? Hey, even I know how to control myself when I need to. Don't forget, I'm a rational battle junkie.

::Aha ha, I'm just messing with you. Okay, let's do a little more fighting on our way back. Sound good?::

What a wonderful idea. That's a yes from me.

::Rational battle junkies really are different. By the way, Kelvin-kun, I have good news and bad news for you.::

Well, that's sudden. All right, I'll play along. I'm supposed to choose one, right?

::Mhm!::

Then...bad news first.

::The ghost's not on the castle wall anymore. I lost sight of it. Oopsies.::

Damn, you're right.

::Its presence faded all of a sudden. No wonder they call it a ghost!::

It managed to slip through your detection skills? That doesn't bode well for the possibility of it being a living being. Is it a really powerful ghost monster, then? Hmm...oh, right, what's the good news?

::You've a wonderful surprise behind you!::

I turned around, following where Ange was pointing, and found the ghost standing a hundred meters away—close enough for me to finally grasp its size—smack-dab in the direction we had come from. It had circled around us without us even noticing.

::Good for you, Kelvin-kun. You actually get to fight Gustav's ghost!::

Ha ha ha! Looks like today's my lucky day!

The two of us drew our weapons, not sure whether to feel happy or alarmed by this development. Of course, if this had been a monster, we would have immediately leaped forward and begun the fight. However, things were different with this so-called "Gustav's ghost." If it was actually Gustav himself, it would be extremely rude of me to suddenly attack without saying anything. He'd hate me even before learning I was Sera's boyfriend. I couldn't have that, so I tried to engage him in conversation.

"It might sound strange considering the current circumstances, but we mean you no harm. I admit, spying was in bad taste. I apologize."

This close, I could now tell that the ghost was about Gerard's height, but I still couldn't make out its actual form. Through the red haze, I could barely catch contour lines that seemed to indicate it was a guy. Analyze Eye gave me no info, though, likely having been blocked by the haze. And that was about everything I could glean with my eyes. The ghost was just standing there, not moving and certainly not replying.

::Do you think it heard you?::

Maybe it's ignoring me? Either way, it managed to discover us from all the way atop the castle wall and get down here without us noticing. Maybe it's got really high detection abilities. Don't let down your guard; we might be fighting at any moment now!

::Kelvin-kun, I get that you're excited, but be patient a little while longer, okay? We still have to confirm that it's not Gustav.::

Oh, I know. So this is...yep, it's a battle against myself!

::I only hope that this battle with yourself doesn't unlock some strange new door in y—oh, it's making a move.::

Looks like it.

The ghost suddenly began moving with rasping screeches. It gathered its red haze in its right hand and turned it into a long weapon the length of its body. The shape was that of a naginata—no, the blade was way too large for that. At the end of the shaft was something similar to a Chinese falchion, giving the entire weapon the appearance of a yanyuedao, a Chinese pole weapon, the most popular example of which was the Green Dragon Crescent Blade wielded by Guan Yu. The ghost swung the weapon in circles above its head, emanating waves of bloodlust that washed over us as if to intimidate.

We meant it no harm, but it totally means us harm. I guess this forces our hand, right? We don't have a choice, right? This is legit self-defense!

::According to the stories I heard during my investigation, Demon Lord Gustav used to wield a giant naginata as long as he was tall. Are you sure about doing this?::

There's still the possibility that this is a fake who's only pretending to be Gustav. And even if that really is Gustav, there's no way for us to talk with him if he doesn't want to talk. I guess I'm an idiot for trying to speak civilly with a Demon Lord in the first place. If we're to communicate, we should do it with our fists. I'm sure that's what he prefers!

::That's just...actually, if it's Sera-san's father, I guess I can see that being the case. Oh well. You look like you're having fun. I love that smile of yours, Kelvin. It's so cute.::

I was smiling? I mean, I've been told before that my smile during battle is cool, but this is my first time hearing it called cute. That makes me happy...I think? I'm really curious to know what it looks like now, but it's not like I can look in a mirror in the middle of a fight. Oh, what if I ask the Beast King to transform into

me and do my smile? Oh wait, no, he only transforms into women. Damn that perv!

::Heads up!::

The ghost suddenly started running towards us with its blade dragging along the ground, overturning dirt and kicking up grass. I had not expected it to be as fast as it was, given its appearance, but it was definitely exceeding Gerard's top speed despite being similar in size.

WHOOSH.

Once it got close enough, the ghost unleashed a sharp horizontal slash that Ange and I had to leap back to avoid. The two of us then promptly made our move while the ghost was still ending its swing.

Radiance Crossfire!

::Crushing Weight!::

The weights shot out from Ange's sleeves alongside the many lances of light generated by my spell. I was aiming for the ghost's right hand—its weapon hand—while Ange was aiming for its pivot foot. If its sprint just now had been its top speed, then our attacks would definitely land. I was sure of it, but...

FWOOOM.

The ghost's yanyuedao began spouting fire. Relying on the sideways force generated by the expulsion of flames, the figure slid sideways, dodging our attacks by a paper-thin margin. It was basically the same concept used by the Flame Dragon King, just on a smaller scale. Since the nozzle for the flames was behind the blade, this move could be used to both evade attacks and make the weapon swing faster.

Burning yanyuedao in hand and spreading vestiges of red mist everywhere, the ghost now rushed at us with even greater speed than before. Instead of saying that it ran towards us, it would be more accurate to say that it *glided* towards us. I could see how normal demons would struggle to deal with a target that was going this fast and wielding a weapon that dealt damage over a wide area with so much reach. They probably wouldn't even be able to see this "ghost" with their naked eyes, and even if they did, it would be no more than a

red blur that was only roughly humanoid. The flames coming out of its blade could possibly have been mistaken for floating will o' the wisps. In this way, it did indeed look like a ghost, and it was easily as strong as a Rank S monster. However...

This guy just dodged our attacks. Instead of phasing through, it forced itself to get out of the way.

::You used magic, so maybe it makes sense,:: Ange commented, ::but my attack was purely physical and it still dodged it. I guess that's confirmation it's not actually a ghost, then. And I highly doubt it can use its instant teleportations in quick succession.::

What a pity.

It was a very disappointing discovery. In all likelihood, this “ghost” was not Gustav either. True, it had incredible mobility, was probably faster than Gerard, and could go even faster using its flames. But that was all there was to it. In the first place, Gerard's strength was not in his speed but in his incredible toughness—he wouldn't even have to use his shield to withstand Red Mist's attacks, with the exchange quite possibly destroying Red Mist's weapon instead. Also, Red Mist's speed was inferior to even mine, to say nothing of Sera's and Rion's. Lastly, although it had managed to catch Ange and me by surprise by suddenly teleporting behind us, it was showing no sign of using that ability again. Calling whatever this was “Gustav” or “former Demon Lord” would be an insult to Sera, Gustav's actual daughter.

Ange, go for it.

::Okay, I'll finish things, then.::

We charged straight at Red Mist. It immediately swung its yanyuedao, bolstering the destructive force and speed with flames, but Ange's chains shot forward and tangled up the long weapon's handle, stopping the attack.

::So it *does* have a physical body.::

Since we were done confirming what we needed to, I drove a fist clad in White Magic—I was taking a page from the way Sera used Black Magic—into Red Mist's abdomen. A dull crack rang out, then the Divine Dress spell that I

used took effect and dispelled the red mist all at once. It proved all the more effective since I had concentrated it into just the area of my fist.

Now, let's see your face.

With the mist that had interfered with our perception gone, it was time to find out the true identity of "Gustav's ghost."

Huh? This is...

::Is... Is that a golem?::

Looks like it.

We were looking at a golem that had the red hair and long, flowing red beard on its chin that served as the eponym for Gustav's nickname of Redbeard. Based on Ange's info about the naginata and the physical characteristics I had heard about from Subordinate Demon, it was clear that whoever had made this golem had intentionally made it look like the former Demon Lord.

::Ah, be careful, Kelvin. The golem can still move. It's trying to swing its large naginata.::

Ange was still struggling with the Gustav golem for control over its weapon, her metal chains screeching as they scraped against the yanyuedao's shaft. I had no idea what had led to the creation of this creature, but it still had the energy to continue resisting.

Let's take it out of commission first.

I had Ange press the golem down onto the ground using her chain, then I ran it through with a few Obsidian Edges. Only then did it finally stop moving.



The pitch-black Demon Lord Castle of Grebareika stood tall and imposing under a bloodred sky. This was the seat of power of the man who had once stood at the top of Abyssland, Demon Lord Gustav, and where his decisive battle with Hero Serge had taken place.

The current state of the castle left no doubt as to the outcome of that fateful fight. After Gustav had been struck down, his faithful retainers and citizens had scattered to various parts of Abyssland in a mass exodus.

The reason for this was not because they had suddenly lost their love for their country. In Abyssland, when the king of a country was killed, the climate of the nation could alter quite drastically. The fact that it was the Hero who had killed Gustav added another unknown variable to the phenomenon. The large number of varying races that had lived together in Grebarelka each feared that the coming changes to the climate might make it impossible for them to survive. Therefore, it was not long before the country had been completely emptied.

Strangely, after everyone had moved out, the climate of Grebarelka showed no signs of changing. Whereas the land would normally begin converting in a circle radiating outward from the new person in power, nothing of that sort had occurred. In hindsight, this made sense: there *was* no new person in power. Serge's goal had only been to kill Gustav. After she had accomplished that goal, she had immediately returned to the overworld and never returned. Since it had been abandoned by its new sovereign, the influence of its previous one remained dominant in Grebarelka.

After this, war had broken out again among the demons, and the once overwhelming size of Grebarelka was chipped away at until it was left with only the capital. Everyone had thought the city with the towering Demon Lord Castle, being unprotected as the rest of the country's land had been, would also soon fall into someone's hands.

Contrary to expectations, however, the capital never did fall. All attempts had been thoroughly rebuffed, no matter the size of the army dispatched or the race that had sent it. Not a single mouse was allowed to pass the city walls. The very few soldiers who had miraculously managed to make it back to their own countries all said the same thing: "Gustav's ghost showed up."

At first, the countries' leaders had simply scoffed and sent more armies. However, the result—and the reports that came back, when there were any—were the same each time. Scoffing gradually gave way to belief, and when countries learned the same thing had happened to their neighbors, all of them stopped trying. Everyone had tacitly come to an agreement and never mentioned attacking Grebarelka again. The Impregnable City-State. The Land with the Demon Lord's Grudge. The Cursed Demonic Capital. Names and

rumors abounded, with there being no one brave or skilled enough to get inside the city to see the truth for themselves. Everything had been obscured in darkness.

Actually, no, there was an exception.

“Fuwaahh...” A young girl with red hair let out a huge yawn. She lay sprawled out across the Demon Lord’s throne as if it were a sofa. The constant moon in the sky made it hard to tell what time it was, but she had apparently just woken up from an afternoon nap.



“Condemner, a heads-up...”

A man’s voice rang out from beside the girl. She looked over languidly and found her Holy Key activated.

She clicked her tongue. “What, Creator? Did you develop a new golem?”

“No, but good instincts. It *is* related to golems.” The man on the other side, Creator of the Third Seat, sighed deeply. “One of the 358 Cardinal Rage golems set up in the vicinity of the Demonic Capital for intercepting invaders was just destroyed. It was just a mass-produced model, but there are very few who could do this.”

“So?”

“That’s quite the attitude. You do remember these are the golems that I went to the trouble of making for you so that you could concentrate on your missions, right? Even you would have a tough time beating back all the demon armies without letting them get a good look at you, I imagine.”

“Not really.”

“You...never mind. I heard that *his* group has just gone through the Fiery Mouth of Purgatory. Or should I say, *she* has.”

“I know.”

“What?”

“I’ve known for ages now. It’s hardly news to you that my detection abilities are second only to Assassin among the Apostles, and this is my territory. I’m aware of all the golems here, both active and inactive. How could I not notice intruders? Judging from the presence, it’s Black Robe and... *Tch*, the other one erased their presence. Must be Assassin.”

Condemner of the Sixth Seat, Bell Baal, stroked her side ponytail once, then leaped off her throne. Although her motions appeared careless, her landing was surprisingly quiet.

“In any case, today is probably just reconnaissance. If they don’t try to enter the city, I won’t do anything.”

“Here’s to hoping, then. Unfortunately, I’m quite busy. Chances are I won’t be available to help you if anything does happen. You’ll have to make do with the Cardinal Rages.”

“You’re probably just up to another one of your weird experiments again, right? Don’t worry, I wasn’t counting on your help in the first place. When are you not experimenting? You know, if you keep yourself locked up in your lab all the time, someone’s gonna pull the rug out from under you.”

“Hmm, I’ve got nothing to say to that.”

Banter wasn’t much fun when the other side wasn’t willing to play along. Condemner thought conversing with Assassin was sort of acceptable, but conversing with Creator was an absolute drag, as he almost never expressed any emotion. Bell was ready to hang up the call already.

“You might not be able to tell, but I have emotions too.”

“You’re peeping at me? You wanna die?”

“Peep at you without you knowing? That’s a misunderstanding and difficult to pull off in the extreme. No, a little application of psychology goes a long way. Just saying, love and friendship can at times evoke very surprising strength, so you would do well to keep that in mind. If you don’t want to get burned like I did, that is.”

Creator’s voice droned on dispassionately as if he thought he was giving her advice. Bell, however, couldn’t have cared less about what he was saying.

“You don’t have the time to waste on chitchat, right? I’m hanging up. Got work.”

“Ah, that matter. I confess I cannot comprehend what Arbitrator is thinking at times. There is no longer any need for it, and yet she is sending such a precious sample as you—”

“Okay! Shut! Up! I’m just following Arbitrator’s orders. It’s the same for you too!”

“So it is. I shall say no more, then. Let us both serve Our Lady to the best of our abilities for the sake of our own wishes.”

The Holy Key then fell silent. Still charged with emotion, Bell decided to vent a little by giving the white key a good kick. It zipped to the opposite end of the audience hall and buried itself halfway into the wall.

Chapter 3: Growth and Results

Ange and I decided to return to Doktoría after beating “Gustav’s ghost” in Grebarelka, as going any farther was clearly beyond the definition of reconnaissance. There was a part of me that wanted to push on, but I now had a souvenir in my hands and it was nearing the time promised by the research team. So I decided to put off the fun exploration of Grebarelka for another day. Exercising a little self-control every now and then never hurt anyone.

When I got back, I found Gerard, Rion, and Alex relaxing in the larger room we were using as a parlor. Efil was nowhere to be seen, but she was likely either out buying ingredients or in the kitchen. Whenever we visited new places, she always went around tasting the local cuisine to learn new cooking techniques, but she understandably wasn’t doing much of that here. After all, the food here in Abyssland left quite a bit to be desired, to put it mildly. If she was to ever serve Abyssland cuisine, it would no longer be Abyssland cuisine but something that had been elevated to a much higher plane of existence.

“Oh, is that not my king?”

“Welcome back, Kel-nii and An-nee!”

“Arf!”

“Rion-chaaaan! We’re back!”

Ange immediately rushed over to envelop Rion in a hug, going several gears faster than what she had used in the fight against the Gustav golem. At that speed, even Rion could not evade her.

“Hey, guys. We’re back. How were things?” I asked.

Gerard shrugged. “We did not get assaulted and no sudden quarrels cropped up. In fact, it was a very boring few days.”

“We can’t train like we normally do either, so yeah, it was quite boring,” Rion agreed. “An-nee, let me go pleeeeeease?”

“Just a little longer!” Ange pleaded, dedicating one hundred percent of her faculties to recharging her little sister gauge.

I nodded. “Oh, right, because this house isn’t right for a training hall.”

To prevent disaster from striking, I had to consider many things when determining whether a location was suitable for building a training hall for my companions. This included whether the surrounding earth could be soundproofed and fortified enough to withstand our attacks and whether the location could be secured to thwart attempts to peek at us and steal our moves. The vast majority of people wouldn’t be able to follow our speed with their eyes anyway, but still.

“Kel-nii, help meee...”

“I’m sorry, but I’m fully on Ange’s side this time. Especially since we haven’t seen you for three whole days.”

“Whaaaat?”

In fact, I’m waiting for my turn to do the same thing. The two of us are desperately low on little sister element.

The three of us who believed in the supremacy of little sisters (and grandchildren) exchanged looks, then said in unison, “That’s just how it is!” Our hearts became one in that moment, and we naturally raised our hands to bump fists. I thought I heard Alex, who was lying on the ground underneath a sofa a short distance away, sigh a little, but I knew I had imagined it.

Eventually, Ange reluctantly let go of Rion so I could have my intake of little sister element too. A short while later, Efil walked in, apparently drawn by all the noise we were making. She was holding a large bowl and furiously stirring the contents into a froth.

“Rion-sama, what is the commotion— Oh, Master!”

“Hey there, Efil. We’re back.” *Is she making some kind of confectionary?*

For some reason, the moment Efil and I locked eyes, her hand stopped and her face began turning red at a visible rate.

“My deepest apologies, Master! I’m aware that making food outside the

kitchen is terribly inappropriate! And I'm even walking around... I'm so, so sorry!"

"Oh, no, it's fine. You're totally good. I don't mind, especially when we're at home." *Rather, I'm a sucker for a girl who's cooking. I don't get to see her like this often, because the kitchen is her holy ground and I don't feel comfortable casually strolling in. So, I actually do want her to come out every once in a while.* "It's perfect."

"I'm sorry?"

"Nothing. So, what's that you're making? Cream for a cake?"

"Yes, Master. It's to cleanse Mel-sama's and Mdo-chan's palates."

"Why would they need that?"

According to Efil, my party's gluttonous goddess and sweet-toothed sniper were currently eating the city's restaurants out of stock and cellar, and she was making something for them to have when they got back. Apparently, the two were satisfied filling their bellies with food from hell as long as they finished it off with something actually delicious. And to keep the record straight, they were properly paying for everything they ate. They were not causing trouble for the citizens either, as these places normally had very few to no customers. As such, the stall owners and restaurant managers were the ones actively vying for their attention. In a way, this fervent seeking out could be called worship, meaning that our goddess was now being worshipped by demons here in hell.

Efil concluded, "They come back every day with endless complaints but head out to do the same the next day."

"Oh, I saw them yesterday," Rion said. "I spotted a place that had gathered a crowd so I went to see what was happening and found Mel-nee and Mdo-chan going, 'This is disgusting; give me another!' and 'This pastry is absolutely deplorable; give me another!' while clearing plate after plate."

Wait, I know that feeling. It's where you think something's disgusting but you still get hooked on the taste. Uh...are they getting hooked?

The only answer I could manage was, "It's good they're being open to eating new food, yep."

Efil agreed warmly, “That is indeed a wonderful attitude to have.”

“By the way, how’s Shutola’s group doing? I made sure to come back with Ange today because they said that’s when they’d be done.”

“When I brought them their meal just now, they told me repeatedly, ‘Just a little more, just a little more.’ From what I could see, they’ve been working nonstop for three days and nights.”

I can only imagine how exhausted they must be.

Gerard spoke up. “I did remind them to rest up properly, but they refused to listen. They insisted they would be fine as long as they took short naps.”

“C’mon, I know you have trouble saying no to your grandchildren, but this was a moment when you really should have put your foot down. It’s not like there’s a reason for them to be in such a rush.”

“My king, you wouldn’t say that if you saw the smile Shutola gave me.”

“Sera-nee and Colette were *really* insistent too. I couldn’t follow what they were saying, so I let them be.” Rion hunched her shoulders a little. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

“Of course, I could not simply let Shutola ruin her health, so I took measures!” Gerard quickly added. “I asked Efil to take care of the three of them. That was a rather brilliant idea on my part, if I do say so much.”

“You left it to Efil?” *Then again, Efil would definitely make nutritionally balanced meals for the team and look out for them. She’s literally the best person he could have asked.* “That’s actually a good call. All good, then.”

“I know, right?”

I thought I could almost see Gerard smirk behind his helmet.

Efil’s eyebrows furrowed a little. “Um, I’m glad that everyone trusts me so much, but there actually wasn’t all that much I could do.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, lass,” Gerard chided her.

“That’s right!” Sera agreed. “You were a huge help!”

I nodded. “We keep telling you this, Efil, but you really can take more pride in

what you— Wait, Sera?! Since when have you been here?!”

“Since just now!”

Don't just show up without warning! You gave me a fright!

The demon put a finger to her lips. “Also, shh! Shutola’s sleeping!”

A second look revealed that Shutola was fast asleep on Sera’s back. *Uh, Sera, are you aware that you were speaking louder than all of us just now?*

“Bringing the conversation back,” Sera continued, “your support helped us make a lot more progress than we otherwise would have. Thanks a lot!”

“But all I could do was make dishes that gave stamina and try to raise morale a little by picking up around the room so you had a slightly better working enviro — Oh, I did also make a new plushie for Shutola-sama so she could relax better while napping. That’s all I did, though!”

“You mean the one she’s holding right now?” I looked at the pink teddy bear in Shutola’s arms.

Efil nodded. “I made it to fit the size of her body so it would also serve as a body pillow. Um...was it too effective?”

“Zzz...zzz...”

Ah, we are being blessed by the presence of an angel.

“It was so effective that she had trouble waking up,” Sera chuckled. “She did manage to get up, though, through sheer force of will.”

“So that’s what happened.” I looked around. “By the way, I don’t see Colette anywhere. Did you give her something too, Efil?”

“Oh, Colette collapsed in front of the gate, so I stuffed her into a sleeping bag,” Sera replied.

Oh my goddess. Just how hard did these three push themselves?

“As advised by Mel-sama, and with her permission, I gave Colette-sama a, uh, a handkerchief that Mel-sama had carried with her for an entire day without first washing it,” Efil admitted. “When Colette-sama received it, she, um, suddenly seemed so energetic that I could not help but worry for her. She went

a bit out of control.”

My eyes widened. “What a terrifying thing you did!”

Handing Colette one of Melfina’s personal possessions is a guaranteed way of getting her all fired up. With her sense of smell activated like that, she’s sure to push herself beyond her limits until she completely burns out. But then again, she probably really enjoyed it, so, uh...maybe we don’t really have a problem here?

“You won’t believe how hard Colette worked after that.” Sera shivered. “Honestly, it scared me a little!”

“How about Sera?” I asked. “She seems fine.”

Efil replied, “Sera-san remained energetic all throughout without me having to do anything.”

Sera smiled proudly. “My base stamina is just different! Hah!”

Ah, she’s on a bit of a midnight high from the lack of sleep— Whoa! “What? Why’re you pulling me?!”

“Let me show you what we made!” Sera was grabbing my hand and dragging me towards the room with the teleportation gate, paying no mind to the fact that Ange and I had just gotten back and were still catching our breath. Due to her high, she had completely forgotten what she had told us earlier about staying quiet and was speaking in a loud voice that projected very well. Naturally, her doing so right next to Shutola’s ear woke the sleeping princess up in spite of whatever comfort her new favorite plushie gave her.

“Nn...nnn...”

“Now look what you did, Kelvin, speaking in a loud voice like that. I *told* you Shutola was sleeping!”

“You...really should go and wash your face at least, Sera.”

Okay, I get it now. Sera looks fine, but she’s gripping my arm with as much unbridled power as when she’s drunk. She’s only putting up a front and actually needs sleep as badly as the other two.

“Oh, dearest brother, you’re ba—” Shutola was interrupted by a big yawn.

“You’re back...”

“I am, but you’re tired. Go on and sleep.”

“I... I’m fine.” She yawned again. “I wanna tell you what we did with the gate.”

While rubbing her leaden eyes with one hand, Shutola reached out with the other to pull my sleeve like Sera was doing. However, her arm wasn’t long enough, and it stopped in midair, quivering slightly from exertion. In her half-asleep state, she began getting stubborn, but her increased efforts at reaching farther did nothing, and tears of frustration began welling up in her eyes. At the same time, Sera’s grip on my arm continued getting stronger and stronger.

“All right, all right! Take me to the room.” *Both my body and mind are reaching their limits! I suppose if I first entertain these two, they’ll naturally go get their much needed sleep afterwards.*

Gerard lumbered to his feet. “I haven’t had much opportunity to enter the research team’s room either. I shall come along.”

“Arf.” Alex also got up, picking his way forward by weaving between everyone’s feet.

“Oh, Alex. You finished Evolving too? Uh...huh?” Confused by Alex’s appearance, Shutola rubbed her eyes again. However, no matter how hard she looked, Alex was still the size of a large household dog. In other words, he had shrunk significantly.

I gave Shutola’s head a few pats. “So you really haven’t left the room at all.”

Just before Ange and I had set off for Grebareika, Alex had finished Evolving inside my magic pool. After that, his appearance had become...well, I’ll show you his updated Status.

Alex (3 y/o, Male, Vanargand)

Level: 135

Title: Heat Haze

HP: 4,233/4,233 (+100)

MP: 1,582/1,582 (+100)

Strength: 2,891 (+640) (+100)

Endurance: 1,958 (+100)

Agility: 2,280 (+100)

Magic: 1,384 (+100)

Luck: 1,245 (+100)

Equipment: Demon Sword Caladbolg (Rank S), Goddess's Collar (Rank S)

Skills: Shadow Travel (Unique), Creeping Darkness (Unique), Imitator (Unique), Sword Mastery (Rank S), Agility (Rank S), Olfaction (Rank S), Covert Action (Rank S), Sky Walk (Rank S), Concealment Detection (Rank S), Herculean Strength (Rank S)

Passive Effects: Summoning/Magic Supply (Rank S), Concealment (Rank S)

As could be seen, he had grown strong enough to be a very fair match for Rion after her Evolution into a saint. He had also obtained a vast number of Skill Points that he largely had yet to use. If asked, I was ready to recommend that he pick up Fortitude, the skill that buffed HP. It would make him as tanky as Gerard, which was just what Rion needed in a partner, as her own build was specced for dealing rather than taking damage.

"I get that he got stronger, but why did he shrink?" Sera asked, circling around Alex like a satellite. "I'd expected him to get so big he couldn't get into the house."

On the other hand, Shutola's immediate reaction was to rub Alex's fur. "He's so fluffyyyy!" The sight left Gerard pinching his nose.

Dude, you don't get nosebleeds!



“Allow me, Alex’s partner, to explain!” Rion declared proudly, putting her hands on her hips.

“You will?” Shutola turned towards her, her hand still petting the wolf.

“You know how he was only using Creeping Darkness to control the shadows in his surroundings all this time? Like, using them to move things around and restrain targets.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“He thought of a different way of looking at this skill. Instead of using the shadows around him, he tried using the ability on himself with the assumption that he was also shadow. You know, because his original race was shadow wolf.”

“Arf!”

Long story short, Alex had succeeded in controlling himself the way he did any other shadow, which had unlocked the ability to manipulate his size however he wanted. I had yet to see it, but he could apparently take on other appearances too. Without this ability of his, however, his current size was indeed bigger than that of a house. Because that would be inconvenient, he had chosen to go with the size of a large dog for his everyday life.

Sera nodded appreciatively. “I see. He’s controlling himself as a shadow. Sounds like that’s really useful!”

“His fur is just as smooth and fluffy as ever, though!” Shutola noted.

“That’s because I make sure of it by brushing him often!” Rion beamed. “Though if he reverts to his full size, it’s a bit of an undertaking.”

“That bad?” Sera grabbed Alex’s head and looked into his eyes. “Alex, I want to see your full size!”

Shutola raised a hand. “Me too, me too!”

“Arf, arf?” Alex tilted his head quizzically.

“No, you can’t! He’ll break the house!” Rion wailed.

The other two went “Aww” in unison, but we were definitely not having Alex

take on his full size here. If he really wanted to show off, we had a training hall underneath our house back in Parth. Otherwise, we could find a random open plain. This was the same reason Boga and Mdo were forbidden from assuming dragon form indoors—the size of their bodies was just on a whole other scale. Then again, they were all still nothing compared to Clotho if it ever got serious.

Sera clapped her hands together as if she had just had an epiphany. “This is perfect timing, then! We can go back home as a way to demonstrate the results of our development, then have Alex do his reveal in the underground training hall!”

Shutola started. “Oh, right, we were talking about the teleportation gate! Dearest brother Kelvin, hurry, hurry! We came up with something really cool!”

Our conversation had apparently circled all the way back to the teleportation gates. *All right, let’s head into the research lab where the fanatic sleeps.*

When we reached the door to the room, we found Colette waiting for us outside, fully groomed. I had no idea where she’d learned it, but she was bowing with one hand over another the way a proprietress of a traditional Japanese inn would do it. Contrary to my expectations of her being passed out in a sleeping bag, she looked quite full of energy.

“Okay, you *look* like a saint, but...what’re you doing?” I asked.

“I was told that you have a great liking for Torajian culture. When I visited Toraj’s hot spring town as part of my pilgrimage, I learned the local way for a woman to carry herself. I also took the opportunity to spend some time in the bath myself. The water felt wonderful.”

She’s talking about that hot spring town, right? Ugh, since she brought it up, now I really, really want to go. Grrr, I’m gonna ask her for a good recommendation some other time. Then I’ll enjoy the heck out of it.

“I heard from Sera that you were all burned—ahem, that you were sleeping. How’d you know we were coming?”

“What’re you saying, Kelvin-sama? My faith would never fail to notice the fragrant aroma carried by your and Rion-sama’s approach, even if I’m asleep! When am I to wake up if not now? Indeed, there is no better time than now!”

Ah, and if Melfina's here too, I'm sure we'll also see transparent "faith" dribbling from her mouth and red "faith" running from her nose. No matter how much effort she puts into learning "how a woman is to carry herself," Colette will always be Colette. People just don't change that easily.

After that little exchange at the door, we finally entered the room, where Colette declared, as if preaching, "Behold! This is the crystallization of our blood, sweat, and faith in analyzing and transforming the teleportation gates!"

"That's a lotta things mixed together," I noted dryly.

Standing smack-dab in the middle of the room were what looked like two dull gray torii gates. One was the same size as the teleportation gates I had seen before, about five meters tall. It was eye-catching for its size, but the other was what grabbed my attention. It was only about the size of a door.

Not only were the gates different, their user interfaces were too. The big one had a very heavy-looking stone pedestal, whereas the small one looked quite similar to a smartphone. I'd seen quite a few gates in my time, but all of them had been huge, so the smaller one felt quite novel.

"I noticed when I brought meals here that all of you spent quite a while on this smaller one," Efil commented.

"That's right!" Sera nodded deeply. "Your Discernment never fails to impress, Efil!"

"Um, thank you...I guess?"

I'm pretty sure Discernment has nothing to do with her making a simple observation.

While I was swallowing my snarky comment, Shutola, who had been appointed chief of the research team, produced a teacher's pointer and stepped up to the front. She was wearing a baggy lab coat over her usual dress and a pair of fashion glasses. It seemed she would be explaining everything to us.

Kudos for making the effort to look the part too. Though I bet it was Sera who put the idea into her head and lent her everything.

“To explain, this small door is a portable version that we developed after analyzing the symbols all over the inside of the original teleportation gate and altering them.”

“You actually made a portable one?” Oh wow, this is turning out a lot more incredible than I’d dared to hope. Do we now have a portable door that can go anywhere like what a certain nationally loved blue cat has? No, let’s think about it calmly. That door supposedly doesn’t need any fuel or a catalyst and can be used with no limitations. There’s no way such a thing could be real. This one must have limitations of sorts.

“The biggest difference compared to the original teleportation gates is that this one is much smaller and therefore generates much smaller portals. There are two upsides to this: first, the amount of MP needed to activate it is only a fraction of the original; second, the portals it generates can be kept open for a lot longer. Our biggest challenge when overlapping symbols was suppressing their mutual repulsion without lowering their effectiveness. We had a breakthrough thanks to dearest sister Sera coming up with an absolutely brilliant idea for layer construction that involved—”

“Hold on a minute! This is an incredible invention! I get that!”

But once she started talking, Shutola just kept going. When she got to how the door worked, her eyes started shining even brighter, and I instinctively knew that if I didn’t stop her, we would be here all day.

I shot Gerard a look. “Uh, so...Grandpa Gerard said he wants to listen to every last detail of your struggles and how you overcame them, but at a later time. Can you just tell us what this gate does for now?”

“Oh, really? Okay!” Shutola gave Gerard a big smile. “Guess we’re saving the best part for last, right, grandpa?”

“We sure are!” the dark knight immediately replied in a very loud voice.

Today is the first time I’ve seen the phrase “the right person for the right job” fit a situation so perfectly. I’m sure Gerard would be more than happy to listen to his grandchild lecturing for hours, and Shutola would be happy to have an audience that she can share all the results of her latest research with. This is exactly what a mutually beneficial relationship is.

Shutola continued. “I’ll simplify things, then. As I said, the amount of MP needed to activate this portable teleportation gate is a lot less than other ones. The best thing about it is that it can be brought and used anywhere. It’s still quite big for something that’s meant to be portable, but we have Clo-chan’s Storage to rely on.”

“It *is* the size of a door, true.” I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. “But even considering that, having a teleportation gate that can be used anywhere is incredible!”

“There are limitations, of course. In exchange for being able to set it up anywhere, other gates can’t reach it. In other words, this gate can only be used to *go* somewhere else and cannot be used to arrive *from* somewhere else. Also, because the frame of the gate is so small, Mdo-chan, Boga-chan, and Hak-chan won’t be able to go through in their dragon forms, but they should have no problem in their human forms. Alex and Clo-chan can alter their body sizes too, so I think we should have no problem using it.”

“I see. So this would be something to use outside of battle.”

“May I ask a question?” Ange interrupted, raising a hand. When Shutola nodded, she asked, “What happens to this door after it’s used?”

A blank look came over the faces of the sage, saint, and demon as they all went, “What?” in unison. I thought I even saw Shutola’s glasses slip a little on her face.

“Um, what do you mean by ‘after it’s used’?” Shutola asked.

“Exactly as it sounds. From your explanation, I understand this gate can be used wherever. But after I use the gate—say, I walk through it and appear wherever it is that I wanted to go—what happens to it? Does it follow me through? Or does it stay where I used it? In my profession, we don’t really like to leave evidence behind, you see.”

A “now that you mention it!” look came over the faces of the research team.

Ah, so it just stays there. Judging by how shaken they look, it seems like the three biggest minds of our party honestly did not think about what will happen to the gate after it’s used. Is it really gonna become a portable one-use-only

teleportation gate?

I suggested, “Maybe we ensure that one of us stays behind to pick it back up?”

“Oh, I know!” Rion made a gesture as if an idea had occurred to her. “We can just have Clo-chan leave a clone to retrieve the door. Y’know, because the clones also have access to Storage.”

Three voices cried, “THAT’S IT!” at the same time.

Oh, that would indeed solve the issue. Sera and Colette, don’t think I missed the drops of cold sweat you just surreptitiously wiped away.

“Rion-chaaan!” Shutola tearfully rushed into the other girl’s arms and buried her face in her chest.

“Wh-What is it, Shutola-chan?”

“Thank youuu! I can’t believe I overlooked something so basic. I’m so embarrassed I feel like my face is on fire!”

“Aha ha, it’s not that bad. But it’s true you rarely make such a fundamental mistake. What happened?”

“Um, well, King Galia gave us two gates, so the three of us were like, ‘While we’re at it, we might as well go all out!’ So we took one apart with the intention of throwing it away but then managed to put it back together so well that we got so excited we were just...”

So, they were so absorbed in studying and developing the gate that the small details totally slipped their minds. Yep, I totally get it. Happens to me all the time. I basically forget myself when I make weapons and golems, and it’s even worse when I fight Melfina, Ange, and the rest. But you know what? Being absorbed in something is not a bad thing. That’s what makes life so colorful. I will say it again, and from the rooftops, if need be: being absorbed in something is definitely not a bad thing!

“Of course, I do reflect on it sometimes,” I muttered.

“What is it that you reflect on, Kelvin-sama?”

Whoops, Colette heard me talking to myself. Oh, right, I did cause her quite a

bit of trouble suddenly taking up three days of her time and having her come all the way here to Abyssland. I gotta repay her some other time.

“Nah, I was just talking to myself. I was thinking that it’s important to reflect on past mistakes. Y’know, so I can learn from them.”

“You think so too?! I hope you don’t take offense at my unworthy self agreeing with you, but I think the same. Now, so that I can gain forgiveness for all my regrets, Kelvin-sama, may I please have your foot, or even better, one of the shoes you just came back wearing so that I may diligently and wholeheartedly lick—”

“Shutola! Can I test out this teleportation gate?!”

All channels of Parallel Processing were screaming at me to run. I will leave it to your imagination whether I managed to get away in time.



After Sylvia’s group left, normalcy and peace returned to the capital of Toraj. The Torajian citizens applied themselves to agriculture or fishery, as was their lot, sweating away at their professions and making the most of each day. Perhaps their diligence was a genetic trait passed down by their ancestors; some were doing this for the sake of family as others nursed great ambitions in their chest. Everyone enjoyed the blessing of peace in these unchanging days. Though there were many standards for deciding the ideal country, many scholars firmly believed that, of the large superpowers, Toraj was the closest.

“Ugh, I’m so bored...” Tsubaki leaned back in her chair, yawning listlessly as she looked up at the ceiling of her room. Due to having spent quite a while with Sylvia’s group when they were here, she now had a huge mountain of documents on her desk. However, she did not look particularly concerned by it.

Tsubaki was the direct successor of the crown of Toraj, and the blood of her ancestors flowed thick in her veins. She would never act so slovenly in front of her people, but this was indeed her true nature. She greatly valued industriousness, but her love of enjoyment was even greater. With her as queen, Toraj was enveloped in festivities throughout the year and leisure facilities could be found in every corner of the country. This nation’s monarch and people were in a perfect state of balance when it came to work and play,

which was why the citizens were always all smiles.

“Tsubaki-sama,” a low voice called to the queen from the ceiling of her room.

Having been looking up due to her yawning, Tsubaki immediately confirmed the speaker’s identity. “Ah, Kagenui. Tell me which is better: I work hard at my duties starting tomorrow or I work hard today and take three days off starting tomorrow?”

“My advice would be to work hard today *and* tomorrow. After all, I see you built up a backlog during your merrymaking with Sylvia-dono.”

“Kagenui, you are competent, but you are also far too serious. Are you only capable of such conventional and unexciting answers? This calls for a pay cut.”

Tsubaki took out a notepad from her pocket and wrote on it with elegant strokes of her brush.

Kagenui sighed. “Please don’t casually lower my pay because of a mere conversation.”

“I jest. So, what news?”

“The castle’s teleportation gate has received an application for passage. The applicant is Kelvin-dono—”

“Say that first! I will go meet him in person!” Suddenly filled with vitality, Tsubaki got up and swiftly headed for the door. Her behavior was exactly like that of a cat staunchly refusing to get out from under a kotatsu table only to suddenly dart out upon hearing its food bowl being filled.

“A moment, Your Majesty. There is one detail that bears mentioning.”

“What is it?”

“The location of the teleportation gate that Kelvin-dono is applying from is undetermined. If Sylvia-dono’s account is to be believed, he should also be deep underground at the moment. It would be unwise to open the gate without taking safety measures.”

“Hm, that does sound like it calls for caution. Worst case, we might require our lord’s aid. Very well, I shall take responsibility and make the necessary preparations. Inform Kelvin to wait a while.”

“As you command.”

After confirming that the presence in her ceiling was gone, Tsubaki gleefully rushed out of her room.



In spite of the worries from Tsubaki’s side, the teleportation gate opened smoothly and without issue. They had gone to great lengths making all sorts of preparations, but Kelvin came through exactly as he would have had he been using any other gate.

“*Huff, huff.* It has been a while, Tsubaki-sama. Thank you for granting my visit despite its suddenness.”

Clad in black from head to toe as always, Kelvin paid Tsubaki his respects, thanking her for greeting him in person. However, for some reason, he was out of breath and looked extremely tired.

“As was only natural, considering our friendship.”

“Truly, thank you; you opened the door much faster than I had expected. I somehow managed to get away after only being licked once.”

“Hm? Licked?”

“Ah...please forget that.”

Being the skilled negotiator she was, Tsubaki naturally noticed Kelvin shifting his eyes. Given the sweat on his forehead and heavy breathing, there was a lot of information she picked up with only a quick glance.

For someone of Kelvin’s abilities to be this exhausted, the “licked once” that he let slip most likely refers to a monster he was fighting that possesses a powerful dissolving liquid. So, Abyssland is as terrifying as the rumors say! Is he alone due to having met with trouble after setting out on his own, following his fondness for fighting? I have no idea what manner of place Abyssland is; did he activate an abandoned gate? Oh, joy! The fact that he first thought to escape to Toraj must mean there is still hope he will join us. The day when he is a part of the Tsubaki Guard draws ever nearer!

In spite of everything Tsubaki picked up on, however, the conclusions she

drew were not always necessarily correct.

Phew, I'm glad Toraj accepted my application. I chose it because I thought they had the highest chance of saying yes even though I was applying from Abyssland. Okay, seriously, can we do something about Colette? It's true I was thinking of rewarding her somehow, but I didn't expect her to start licking my boots without permission! She rushed at me faster than should be possible with her stats, and honestly, things would've been bad if I'd come through the gate any later. Is there any way we can set her back on the straight and narrow? Oh, but I've heard that all the Oracles have been weirdos, and Mel did say they're like that because of their genetics. Ah, I guess it's impossible, then.

Tsubaki was right about Kelvin having come here to evade a very furious fight.

"So, you have successfully reached Abyssland," the queen said warmly. "I did not expect you to be ahead of Sylvia's party; they went through the Waterfall of Heaven and Hell only the other day. How is the world below?"

"It's a bit misleading to call it that, actually. Aside from minor things, like the sky, sun, and red stars, it's actually not that different from the overworld. Ah, here are sweets from a demonic city that I've brought as a souvenir."

"How thoughtful of you!"

A shine entered Tsubaki's eyes when Kelvin took out a paper bag. The queen had such an obsession with food that she was still soliciting Efil for the post of head chef at her castle each time she saw her despite the countless times she had been rejected. Having been born and grown up in Toraj, her taste buds were so developed that she made many a professional chef quit. Naturally, this meant she was very curious about what food from Abyssland tasted like, and Kelvin's offer had very much hooked her attention.

"Actually, I'm sorry. I know I'm the one who brought it, but I really don't recommend that you eat this. Let's not do this after all. I'll bring you something made by Efil next time."

There was no way to tell whether Kelvin knew this part of Tsubaki's character, but he did retract his hand mere moments before Tsubaki was about to receive the paper bag.

“W-Wait!”

Tsubaki was extremely flustered. She moved her folded fan around busily, repeating “Stop!” and “Wait!” multiple times.

“But, um...this is actually pretty bad.”

“Even if it tastes incredibly bad, I still want to know what food in Abyssland is like. I’ll look forward to having Efil’s food next time, but for now, I must have these sweets from Abyssland as well.”

Tsubaki almost snatched the paper bag from Kelvin’s hand and opened it. A faint smell of baked goods wafted up. Without further ado, she reached in and picked up a piece.

“Is this not a cookie? It looks and smells fine; I fail to see the problem. Worry not, I quite like non-Torajian sweets too.”

“About the appearance, I did try to pick the best-looking ones. About the taste, though—”

Crunch.

“Ah.”

“This...ha...ha ha... HA HA HA! This is terrible! It is absolutely awful! No, it is so bad that it is actually novel! The baked dough tastes like sand in my mouth!”

Right after Tsubaki put the cookie into her mouth, she started howling with laughter, clutching her stomach. It continued for a while until even Kelvin started worrying if he had made a mistake.

Eventually, Tsubaki caught her breath. “Phew. Something tasting this bad is actually hilarious. This was a good experience, Kelvin. You’ve now piqued my interest in exploring bad-tasting food as well.”

“I...see. If so, I recommend the food made by Sylvia’s group. To be honest with you, I couldn’t bring myself to try it.”

“Is that so? Alas, to learn of this only after their departure! Things don’t always turn out as one would wish.”

The two chatted about terrible food for a while longer, then Kelvin returned

through the teleportation gate. The reason for his visit was to test out the newly made portable gate and to get away from a fanatic, but Tsubaki had interpreted this as him purposely making the journey just to bring her a souvenir. Without realizing it, Kelvin had taken another step towards a future where he would join the Tsubaki Guard.



A whirling pool of light appeared within the teleportation gate in Toraj, and I stepped through with none of the hesitation I had shown when I'd first seen the gates. My field of vision warped a little, then I found myself in a space underneath my home, far, far deeper than the floor where the usual facilities like the training hall, my forge, and my golem workshop were. This was an area hidden behind a "work in progress" sign and a labyrinth so convoluted that even Ellie and Ruka would not have been able to get through without my guidance.

Sera and Efil stepped forward to greet me.

"There you are, Kelvin!"

"Welcome home, Master."

"Hey, you two. Looks like you got the gate up and running."

"Of course we did. After all, I was with Colette and Shutola when we took apart this gate and studied it!"

Getting away from Colette was not the only reason for me teleporting to Toraj. Neither was it just to deliver Tsubaki a souvenir. On top of testing whether the portable teleportation gate worked as intended, I was also trying to confirm whether I could teleport home from Toraj. As such, while I was in Toraj, Efil and Sera had been setting up our other teleportation gate, the five-meter-tall one that needed to be fixed to the ground, underneath our house. After they finished, I had tested it myself, and here we all were.

"I was pretty surprised when you suddenly asked us over the Network to do this," Sera said dryly. "Why didn't you mention it beforehand?"

"I do feel bad, but with Colette being the way she was, there wasn't time," I replied apologetically.

Efil tried to smooth things over. “Thanks to Clo-chan, we didn’t have to carry the gate ourselves, and the setup went very smoothly. As the saying goes, all’s well that ends well. We did end up giving Guildmaster Mist quite a surprise, though.”

The truth was that the idea had only occurred to me when I’d arrived in Toraj. So I was dodging Tsubaki’s advances, passing time shooting the breeze, and giving precise instructions for where to set up the gate using the map on the Network all at the same time. Looking back, my request was indeed quite sudden. At the time, all I was thinking was that if I was going home, I might as well use our own gates instead of another official one that I’d need permission for.

For some reason, Tsubaki-sama appeared to be in really high spirits. No idea why, but, well, it’s never a bad thing working on a relationship, right? As for Guildmaster Mist, we’ll have to apologize to her. I’m sure suddenly seeing a teleportation request from Abyssland caused a pretty big commotion at the guild.

Members of the same party could use their leader’s gate-authorized guild card, so I’d put mine into Clotho’s Storage right after arriving in Toraj so that my companions could immediately use it to apply to Parth. It was a bit of a toss-up whether Mist would accept, but she had, and thank god. Things would have been a lot more troublesome otherwise, as I would have had to run all the way from Toraj to Parth and install the gate myself.

We did tell Ellie and Ruka we were going to Abyssland when we headed out; did they let Mist know just in case? Either way, I’m deeply thankful to Guildmaster Mist for trusting me so much. Let’s bring her not Abyssland snacks but some made by Efil sometime. I know us clearing high-difficulty quests is what makes her happiest, but we’re already doing that on the regular.

“Well, conclusion is, both teleportation gates work just fine.” I nodded with satisfaction. “Going forward, we’ll be able to use them whenever we want.”

“We’ll have to borrow Galia’s teleportation gate to get back,” Sera reminded me, tapping her lip thoughtfully. “He told us to use it casually as if it’s ours too, but I doubt he actually meant it.”

Ah, I think he actually did mean it, one hundred percent. But damn, we're finally at the point where we have our own teleportation gates. We'll probably be receiving people through this gate. We placed it deep underground just in case, but maybe that's not enough. I'll see what I can do to boost our security.

"Master, I'm sorry to bring this up when you're already tired, but I have something else to report."

"Yes, Efil?"

"Well—"

"Efil, it'd probably be faster to just show him in person. That said, Kelvin, we're heading up to the house!"

"W-Wait a m— Seriously, why do you have to keep pulling my ar— OW OW OW OW OW!"

The shortest route home would take at least ten minutes. In other words, I would have to endure the pain of having my arm nearly torn off for the next ten minutes.

Why the hell did you make this path so convoluted, past me?



When we got back into the house, I was brought before Ellie and Ruka, who were both in the middle of working.

"It's Master!"

"Oh my, you're back. Welcome home, Mas— Are you all right, Master?!"

Being seriously wounded, I could only manage a simple, "Hi."

As expected of Sera, the woman topping the leaderboard of cumulative damage dealt to me. If you're curious, second place is Ange, and third is Mel.

"A-Are you okay, Kelvin? Sorry, I got kinda impatient..."

"Barely, but yeah. I healed myself every time I was close to dying. This was a bit—no, significantly more manageable than when you're drunk."

"If you say so..."

How long do you think we've been together for? This version where you're not drunk and properly apologize afterwards while looking guilty actually seems cute in comparison. Oh, thank you for the fanning, Efil. That feels good. Okay, I'm fully recovered!

“Sorry for worrying you guys. Now, what is it that I’m supposed to see?”

“Look right in front of you, Master,” Efil replied.

I was puzzled. In front of me are Ellie and Ruka. They're wearing their usual uniforms. Then there's Sera, who's now gone quiet. What else— Wait a moment, could it be?!

Ellie (28 y/o, Female, Maidkin, Battle Maid)

Level: 130

Title: Perfect Maid

HP: 650/650

MP: 884/884

Strength: 317

Endurance: 288

Agility: 685

Magic: 934

Luck: 870

Skills: Maid Soul (Unique), Combat Technique (Rank C), Red Magic (Rank S), White Magic (Rank C), Demand Detection (Rank S), Teaching (Rank B), Service (Rank S), Magic Conservation (Rank B), Cooking (Rank S), Discernment (Rank S), Sewing (Rank S), Cleaning (Rank S)

Passive Effects: Maid Soul/Demand Detection (Rank S+), Maid Soul/Service (Rank S+), Maid Soul/Cooking (Rank S+), Maid Soul/Sewing (Rank S+), Maid Soul/Cleaning (Rank S+), Concealment (Rank S)

Ruka (10 y/o, Female, Maidkin, Apprentice Battle Maid)

Level: 130

Title: Step-Granddaughter of the Sword Guru

HP: 540/540

MP: 471/471

Strength: 423

Endurance: 244

Agility: 780

Magic: 197

Luck: 1,238

Skills: Zone of Perception (Unique), Sword Mastery (Rank S), Combat Technique (Rank B), Throwing (Rank B), Acrobatics (Rank A), Presence Sensing (Rank B), Covert Action (Rank A), Service (Rank S), Cooking (Rank S), Discernment (Rank S), Sewing (Rank S), Cleaning (Rank S)

Passive Effects: Concealment (Rank S)

Whoaaaa! They Evolved!

“Ehe heh, mommy and I thought we both caught a cold. When we got better, we were a lot stronger!”

“Rosalia and Huba took wonderful care of us. We might as yet be mediocre in comparison to Efil-sama, but we will continue doing what we can to be of help to you.”

Mediocre?! That's putting yourself down way too low. You've basically become as powerful as my party was at the start. You even have Unique Skills now. I did think it was about time Ellie and Ruka Evolved, since they've been in our party this whole time, but I'm blown away by how much they've grown. If they fight Touya now, the outcome might be very different from last time.

“Master, Master! Did I do good?!”

“Mhm, you did great, Ruka. You did great, but...when are you going to stop being an apprentice?”

“You’re supposed to ignore that paaaart!”





Three hours had passed since Kelvin had gone through the portable teleportation gate. The original plan was for him to come straight back to Doktoría after confirming that the gate could indeed be used and that it was safe. However, he never did return, and neither did Sera and Efil after they had stepped through to Parth. All attempts to reach him through the Network only got replies of “Just a little more time.” When Melfina and Red Mdo returned, they found Shutola, Rion, and Colette playing cards for lack of anything better to do.

Eventually, Gerard ran out of patience and Mdofarak ran out of sweets, so the two resolved to go fetch Kelvin, Sera, and Efil in person. They took out Kelvin’s guild card from Clotho’s Storage and used the portable gate to reach Parth.

“Heavens above, testing the gate is fine and all, but why isn’t my king coming back?! Whatever could be keeping him?!”

“He’s likely hogging all of sister Efil’s sweets. There’s no doubt. That’s what I’d do.”

“Indeed, hogging— Hold on a minute. Speaking of hogging, if I had stayed behind, would I not have had the sight of Rion and Shutola enjoying themselves all to myself?! Mdo, would you mind if I went back?”

Gerard’s resolve had crumbled in the blink of an eye.

“No, we mustn’t overuse the gates. If I go without any sweets for much longer, my sniping accuracy will drop significantly. Sister Efil taught me I must never miss.”

“Uh, that’s more something she holds herself to and not so much a teaching. But I suppose it’s true that Princess’s mood will sour if this drags on any longer. Ugh, my Shangri-la...”

“Gerard-sama, you will have to make do with me. I look young enough, do I not? Good, solution found. Hmph, what a lolicon.”

“I’m not, okay?! I’m strictly a grandpa who dotes on his grandchildren!”

The banter between the two flew fast and furious as they strode out of the

Parthian Adventurer's Guild. Guildmaster Mist, who had authorized their usage of the gate, watched their receding backs with a wry smile on her face.

My Analyze Eye can't see the stats of the new girl in Kelvin-san's party, which probably means she's no normal human either. Based on the direction things have always gone...I'll probably have to submit another application to the Adventurer's Directory sometime soon.

It was only just the other day that Ange's and Dahak's aliases had been announced, but Mist was almost sure this new girl would be getting one in the near future too.



A pair of scorching-hot Pyrodragons rushed through the air, with Ruka keeping pace by repeatedly kicking off them à la wallrunning. The three made unpredictable twists and turns while keeping their eyes trained on the same black-robed target: Kelvin. In turn, he was zipping around using Fly, unarmed.

"So you two have figured out a way to deal with midair targets too!" Kelvin said appreciatively while catching the knives flying his way. "You're getting better and better."

"Those words don't sound sincere...when you're saying them with such a cool face...Master!" Ruka retorted.

Ellie sighed. "As I thought, we are still quite far behind Efil-sama..."

Ruka's throwing knives had gotten significantly more accurate and faster than before, but to her chagrin, Kelvin still had no trouble snatching them in the air, and by the backs of the blades, no less. Ellie had also learned how to control two Pyrodragons at the same time, making her twice as effective at dealing damage now. Considering who she was facing, however, she was having difficulty gaining confidence from her growth.

Suddenly, a voice rang out. "Uh, my king...what are you doing?"

It was Gerard, who had made a beeline for the training hall after looking up Kelvin's position on the Network map.

"Hm? Oh, Gerard. You came over? Sorry, I lost track of time sparring with

Ruka and Ellie.”

Upon noticing Gerard and Mdo’s arrival, Kelvin broke up the fight and descended. At the same time, Ellie dispelled her Pyrodragons and Ruka leaped down from her position near the ceiling and landed without making a sound.

Kelvin gushed, “Did you know? Ellie and Ruka Evolved! That’s why I wanted to test out their strength for myself. And surprise, surprise! Both of them are now more than capable of fighting a Rank S monster by themselves!”

“A-A-A-Are you sure, my king?!” Unbecoming of his age, Gerard got extremely flustered and excited upon learning of his grandchild’s growth. One might look askance at how he seemed even more overjoyed than Ruka herself, but that was just part of his personality. He was far too old to change, so Kelvin and the others who had been with him all this time had already learned to ignore it.

That said, it was true that two maids had grown powerful. On top of the significant boost to their stats, they had gained very interesting Unique Skills.

Ruka’s Zone of Perception was quite simple and straightforward: it enabled her to fully grasp the position and state of everything and everyone within her territory. In other words, it gave her the combined effect of all the detection-type skills in existence, albeit strictly within certain spaces. Specifically, her “territory” was the workplace she had grown familiar with, meaning the grounds of the Celsius residence and a little bit beyond. Despite this massive limitation, it was still a skill that Ange, as a master assassin, said she would kill to get. As long as Ruka remained home, no one would be able to infiltrate without her knowing. What’s more, it was now impossible to catch her off guard. At Kelvin’s firm request, she exempted everyone’s personal rooms from her skill.

On the other hand, Ellie’s Unique Skill was not battle-related, but it was still extremely powerful. Maid Soul made the skills related to her duties as a maid one rank higher—this was in effect the skills version of Gerard’s Self-Transcendence, the Unique Skill that bolstered the ranking of his equipment by one. Ellie had already raised all applicable skills to Rank S, as their cost had dropped significantly once her race turned from human to maidkin, meaning she now had these skills at Rank S+ and had surpassed Efil in terms of skill level.

The fact that she had also obtained Efil's previous title, Perfect Maid, bore testament to the heights she had reached.

"Wonderful! Ruka, you are simply wonderful!"

"Aha ha, stop it, Grandpa Gerard!"

The dark knight was praising Ruka profusely while spinning her petite form round and round in the air. Ellie watched from a distance away, smiling happily at the sight.

However, there was someone who had no qualms destroying this heartwarming atmosphere. In a cold voice, Red Mdo said, "My liege, where are the sweets? Cough them up already." She pointed finger guns at Kelvin, even going so far as to gather magic at her fingertips.

"Huh? Uh...there are no sweets here."

"Hogging all of sister Efil's sweets to yourself is a capital offense. I cannot pardon it even though you are my liege. You must be punished."

In the long, long history of this world, Mdo was probably the very first dragon king to ever mug someone for sweets. Never mind trick-or-treat, her dead serious eyes conveyed that this was very much an armed holdup.

Hmm, even though she's become a dragon king, Mdo is still a child. Seeing Gerard and Ruka cavorting together made her jealous and now she wants to play with me!

Kelvin's eyes flew wide open as he readied himself. Apparently, he could interpret even such blatantly belligerent behavior in a favorable way when it came from someone close. Such was the pitiful nature of battle junkies. Soon, Grim Reaper was frolicking with Sweet-Toothed Sniper like owner and pet, except that the pet could—and did, back and forth—turn into a dragon in the blink of an eye. The fierce battle between them raged until Efil showed up with fragrant snacks that she had intended for everyone to enjoy while taking a break from all the sparring.

With the dispute between Kelvin and Mdofarak "peacefully" resolved, it was finally time for the group to return to Doktoría and begin making preparations to set out for Sera's hometown, Grebarelka, the Demonic Capital.



“Now that we’re done experimenting with the teleportation gates, let’s focus on Sera’s homecoming.”

Once we were all back at our base in Doktoria, I gathered everyone for a meeting. “Homecoming” was a nice word to use, but we were effectively going to invade the Demonic Capital, a place that had wiped out entire armies of demons. Keeping in mind the Gustav golem we had met the other day, chances were high that we would be meeting opposition of some sort.

“So, this is the so-called ‘Gustav’s ghost’ that Ange and I encountered on our reconnaissance the other day. As you can see, it’s a golem. Sera, does anything come to mind when you see this?”

The golem that Clotho had retrieved on my orders was now lying on top of a table. Someone had made the effort to make it look like Gustav, so I was wondering if seeing it might jog anything in Sera’s memory.

“It looks quite high-spec. Based on stats alone, it’s probably superior to our knight-type golems, isn’t it? Ah, it’s wearing a magic item that blocks recognition. Maybe we can analyze it and use it to make One and Two even more powerful?”

“That’s definitely a good idea, but...anything else?”

It’s a given that we’ll be putting every part of this golem to good use. No, what I’m hoping for is more like something that only you, as Gustav’s daughter, would know. Like why this golem was specifically made to look like him.

“Um...nothing really comes to mind, sorry. Like, it’s true this golem looks like father, but the similarities are really superficial. It’s equipped with a weapon that looks like what he used, and it’s got a long beard the same color as my hair, but that’s about it. Based on what you said, it was mainly relying on this recognition-blocking equipment and on moving really fast to trick those who saw it. When it’s fully revealed like this, though, anyone who’s ever served father would be able to tell at a glance that it isn’t him.”

I mean, that makes sense. It’s hiding its face with a mask and wearing red clothing, but its mechanical joints are clearly exposed.

Sera went on to explain that Gustav's yanyuedao did not have the ability to spit flames and that she had never seen nor heard of him using Red Magic. She even went so far as to insist that this golem's fighting style would raise the suspicions of anyone with significant fighting strength who had been around Gustav.

Of course, one would have to be at least Viktor's equal—in other words, one of the Four Demonic Generals—to be capable of following this golem's movements properly. It also bothered me a little that this Gustav golem was inferior to the giant blue one that had shown up in Trycen. *Could it be this one's mass-produced? Considering the size of the city it's protecting, I wouldn't be surprised if there were a few and they were stationed all around to cover every direction.*

"The area around the capital's always been considered father's territory. Maybe one of the surrounding countries wants everyone else to continue thinking that way?" Sera suggested.

"As in, trying to make it seem like your dad's still alive?" I shrugged. "Honestly, I still think your little sister's the most likely culprit."

"Condemner might act cold, but she's actually really kind at heart." Ange chuckled. "I wouldn't be surprised if she was doing this out of love for her family."

"Of course she is! She's my little sister, after all!" Sera puffed out her bountiful chest and grinned proudly.

Ange smiled wryly. "Not that we have confirmation she's actually your sister yet." After laughing a little, her face turned serious. "However, what we *do* know is that Condemner is an Apostle of Elearis. Estoria and I ended up betraying the organization, but there's no guarantee Condemner would conveniently do the same. I'm sure she has her own reasons for being an Apostle, and turning away might not be something you can just convince her of. I hope you can prepare yourself for that possibility, Sera-san. For your own sake, and for Kelvin's too."

Sera froze, still in the proud pose from earlier. Ange's words might have sounded blunt, but she had said them for Sera's sake. If Bell actually came after

Sera with the intention of killing her, driven by some personal conviction, would Sera be able to fight back at her full strength? Bell had appeared to Sera when she thought she had lost all her family, and now Sera was fully convinced that Bell was her living sister. If this was a scheme by the Apostles, Sera was falling for it hook, line, and sinker.

“Of course, I’m not forcing you,” Ange added. “If it comes down to it, I’ll—”

“Nope, I’m good!” Sera interrupted. “I’ve just decided my priorities.”

Ange studied her, then nodded. “All’s good, then. Just know we’re always here to help.”

“Sera-nee...” Rion murmured.

As someone who only knew how to fight, I had no way of knowing just how hard Sera had struggled with herself in that brief moment of silence. In the first place, Ange had said what she did on my behalf; it was my place to say those words, and I had dropped the ball. *I really need to step up and be more on top of things I can do to help my companions.*

While my mind went on to stupid thoughts like, *But still, priorities, huh? I sure hope I’m near the top. At least above her father!* the atmosphere in the room continued to grow heavier. I determined the best course of action was to relax the tension in the room by changing to a harmless topic.

“Ah, right. Colette, I’m sorry for dragging you all the way out here without advance notice. We’ve kept you here for quite a few days now; will that affect your Oracle work?”

Over the past few days, our party had gotten so used to having Colette around that her sitting in on our meeting felt entirely natural. It was hardly my place to say it, as I was the one who’d brought her here, but I was somewhat worried about how Deramis was holding up without its Oracle. In spite of everything, Colette was still the country’s second-in-command—in the context of a company, she was a vice president. I could only imagine the uproar that would ensue over a vice president suddenly dropping off the map for a few days without prior notice.

“Please don’t worry, Kelvin-sama. I came here with you of my own will, and I

have also gotten permission from His Holiness through Cliff. I can, in fact, stay for one more week. In the first place, my greatest duty as the Oracle of Deramis is to serve our goddess. In other words, I actually am working right now! I am here to accompany Melfina-sama, to dash myself into the ground for her, and to dedicate my heart, mind, and soul to her! If I must die for her, then so be it, and I'll love her all the more for the honor! Even if I am thrown into an enemy camp as a decoy, even if I am called in the middle of the night, I will do everything gladly and—"

"Okaaaay, stop. Stop. You're raising your voice."

"I-I'm deeply sorry. I got too excited."

I'm the one who's sorry. So much for choosing a harmless topic. Please don't forget there are young children here too, O Oracle. But, hmm, bringing Colette to Grebarelka was definitely not part of the original plan. When shit hits the fan, will I be able to properly protect her?

"Honey, I'm sure Colette will be of help in some way. I am all for bringing her along."

"Melfina-sama!" Colette was so touched that various liquids started spurting from her face.

I watched Efil wiping her off as I crossed my arms and said thoughtfully, "Well, her Oracle knowledge and techniques *have* helped us out in the past, and she's pretty high level too. Depending on which group we assign her to, she just might prove to be a key player...maybe?"

"Kelvin-sama!" Colette cried, the pace of everything coming out of her doubling.

A concerned look came over Efil's face. "Um, Colette-sama, if you lose any more liquid, you'll suffer from dehydration."

Maybe I should just permanently include Colette in my party, like I do Ellie and Ruka. It's not like the XP we all get decreases with more party members. Oh wow, I just realized this, but I guess I really do trust Colette now. Maybe even more so than Touya, my disciple. For now, though, gotta force her to drink some water.

“Are you okay with this, Sera?” I asked.

Sera grinned. “Who, me? I don’t mind if it’s Colette. If anything happens, I’ll protect her, of course!”

I noticed that her smug face was missing a bit of its usual edge, as if she was forcing herself a little.

“I...see. Okay, now that we’ve decided on our roster, let’s go over what we’ll be doing on this fun visit to Grebarelka!”

Chapter 4: Homecomings Have to Be a Bit Dramatic

Expecting there to be more copies of the golem impersonating Gustav that Ange and I had encountered on our date, I had taken up position at a location that gave me a good view of where I thought such golems would appear. This time, I had properly borrowed Farsight from Efil, so I could see just fine despite how far back I was.

::Sera reporting! I see three on top of the castle walls. They really are there!::

::Efil here. I see four figures enveloped in red mist. There are also a few cleverly hidden ones that appear to be deactivated. They do not have the mist.::

Got it. It might be that the mist only appears when they're active. Either way, the more, the merrier.

::Dearest brother, when it comes to enemies, isn't it the fewer, the better?::

Huh?

::Sorry, it's fine. I've gotten used to it by now, so I won't ask any more.::

Wha— R-Right, okay.

If I was to be honest, Shutola's reply made me a little sad. If I could make my case, I wasn't purposely playing dumb. It's just that the question mark naturally came up in my mind. *You can't really blame me, right? I'm not in the wro— No, now I'm being like Gerard. Kelvin, you're rational. You're a rational battle junkie.*

::My king, did you just think something really rude about me?::

Nah, of course not. You're imagining it.

::Hmm, if you say so. In that case, I suppose it's about time we begin the attack — I mean, the homecoming.::

Yep, I know. All teams, sound off.

I had my eyes trained on the Demon Lord Castle while reaching out to everyone through the Network. *Oh, I spotted one more golem.*

::Team Efil is in position.::

::Same for Team Melfina. We're good whenever.::

::Team Gerard is, well, you see us.::

Sera's homecoming would presumably involve fighting through a crowd of golems with the strength of Rank S monsters, fighting an Apostle of Elearis lying in wait within the city walls, and dealing with a revived Demon Lord. What was the most efficient and peaceful way to overcome all these obstacles? The answer was simple: brute force.

To that end, we'd split up into four teams.

The first was Team Kelvin, which would be trying to get into the city and making a beeline for the throne room in order to defeat the mastermind controlling the golems. Obviously, I was leading this team, and Sera and Ange were with me.

The second was Team Efil, whose role was to provide cover fire from a distance. With Efil were Mdo as a sniper and Rion and Alex as their guards just in case enemies got close.

The third was Team Melfina, which was tasked with wiping out the golems around Grebarelka. Colette and Shutola were with her. Since they would be fighting outside, Team Efil would be able to provide them with cover fire. The consideration behind the selection of this roster was that Colette would presumably be able to draw out one hundred percent of her power being in close proximity with Melfina, and that even if she pushed herself too hard and collapsed, Shutola would be able to retrieve her using one of her numerous pawns.

Last was Team Gerard, which included Boga—who was making his first appearance after his Evolution—and a battle-ready Clotho clone, which had been allocated with all the slime's battle-related stats. Their role was...well, you'll see.

Some might see the forceful way we were going about Sera's homecoming and think, "C'mon, isn't there a better way?" To them, I posit that trying to find a peaceful solution through conversation when we were literally facing golems

instructed to eliminate all intruders without warning was a fool's errand. Absolute nonsense.

Then they might ask, "What if Gustav, your future father-in-law, really is in the castle?" My response would be that I'd eventually be fighting him over Sera anyway. Anyone who had sat with the information gleaned from Sera, the daughter he so doted on, for a minute would come to the same conclusion. If so, it was only human nature to want to charge in full throttle, swinging hard. It wasn't that I was getting tunnel vision and only seeing the "good" ending where we learned to understand each other through talking with our fists. No, what I had arrived at was a universal truth.

When we begin, Efil and Mdo, give the other side our greetings with your bombing and sniping. Mel, go ahead and start clearing away the golems. My team will charge straight into the city, fighting only the enemies in our way.

::Kel-nii, are you sure Efil-nee and Mdo-chan need Alex and me to stand guard? I feel like Alex and I'd be a lot more useful going around as a strike unit.::

I know they could probably have a fistfight with a dragon king if one showed up, but stay with them for a while, okay? I assigned you two there more as insurance against any hidden trump cards the other side might have. When the coast seems clear—and this goes for everyone—feel free to move around at your discretion. Just let me know.

::Hey, Kelvin. Just a reminder that if the mastermind really is Bell, she's mine! You agreed during the meeting. Don't you go, 'I changed my mind' at the last minute!:: Sera warned me.

Huh?

::Dearest brother....::

Even over telepathy, I could feel Shutola's judging eyes. *Okay, that's enough joking for n— Of course it was a joke!*

I shook my head to clear my thoughts, then replied, *I remember. If it's Bell, she's yours. If it's Gustav, he's mine. If it's someone else entirely, then the three of us on Team Kelvin will do rock-paper-scissors over the Network, and anyone who throws late loses. Right?*

::Yep! Gotta be fair!::

Ange pouted. ::Seems *really* unfair from my point of view, though. Like, in terms of destiny.::

If we were doing rock-paper-scissors in person, then Ange would most definitely win. After all, the speed at which she could throw her hand and her ability to make snap judgments was far beyond Sera's and mine. Conversely, she would have none of those advantages over telepathy, and luck would be the sole deciding factor. This was the fairest thing we could do. Also, we'd be finished in a split second doing it over telepathy.

::You know that's not what I'm talking about!::

You can pout all you want, but it's not gonna change things. I'm up against Sera too.

::What're you two talking about? We all get an equal chance to win if it's rock-paper-scissors, right?:: said Sera.

Ange and I exchanged a wry look, then replied, ::Of course.::

I did feel a little bad for Ange, but show-offs based on luck were my only chance at victory. Still a small chance, but a chance nonetheless.

::Master, it's about time.::

So it is. All right, everyone...let's get this homecoming underway!



"Tch, they're here." Bell slowly sat up from the throne she had been lounging on, a massive block that seemed to personify evil itself. She rubbed her eyes with a grimace as her red side ponytail draped over her face.

"That's quite the merry band they're bringing. So, you're serious about this, Sera Baal."

She closed her eyes and focused her senses, extending the range of her detection beyond the boundaries of the Demonic Capital to get the full details of what was happening. The next moment, wind whirled around her bare feet, equipping her with purple greaves so quickly it seemed as if she had been wearing them in the first place. Small vents in the greaves expelled powerful

gusts of blue wind, filling not only the room but the entire castle with magic.

“Since Assassin already knows how they work, there’s no point keeping the golems deactivated. All 357 Cardinal Rages, activate. Get rid of the invaders.”

In response to Bell’s murmur, there came the whirring sound of electronic machines starting up, filling the air all through Grebarelka.

“Still, these golems are probably way too weak to do much against this group,” Bell murmured, then clicked her tongue. “Ugh, having to borrow Reviver’s power makes me want to vomit, but I guess I don’t have a choice. I’ll thank that vampire with useless floppy lumps of flesh just this once. Bringing *them* back is the only useful thing she’s ever—”

Bell’s head abruptly whirled towards the direction where a colossal mass of magic had just been launched. The cluster of energy, powerful enough to blow away even this sturdy castle, which had survived the final fight between Hero Serge and Demon Lord Gustav, was mere seconds from making impact.

“Degradation Counter.”

Her purple greaves once again unleashed a blast of wind.



Right after giving his party the go sign, Kelvin took off at top speed with his team. They ignored the golems rising up in their way as best they could, prioritizing getting into the Demonic Capital. However, they quickly realized there were a lot more golems than they had expected. The automatons began generating red mist as they started up and fell into step to form ranks, creating what looked like an undulating, incorporeal crimson wall. Kelvin instantly caught on to the fact that these golems were going to be far more troublesome working in tandem with each other than alone.

A group of Rank S monsters following a proper command structure! Kelvin exclaimed. *Am I seriously supposed to overlook such a thrilling opponent?!*

::You can make that face all you want, Kelvin, but we’re still only killing the very few that actually get in our way,:: Ange warned.

Sera, ever the believer in winning by making the first move, cried excitedly,

::It's time, Efil! Go for it; knock on the door on our behalf with a big bang!::

Just how many people have ever come home while calling for a missile strike on that very same home? Sera was either very confident that this wouldn't actually destroy the Demon Lord Castle or was just getting swept up in the moment.

::Understood,:: Efil replied. ::Mdo-chan, are you ready?::

Mdofarak's three voices growled back at the same time in acknowledgment. She crouched so low in her dragon form that she was almost lying flat, with her powerful claws digging deep into the ground and her limbs braced to absorb even the greatest recoil. The blue lines running through her pale violet scales began glowing intensely, indicating her readiness. And on her back stood Efil, who was gathering an incredible amount of fire at the tip of her arrowhead.

A concentrated beam of energy shot out from each of Mdofarak's three mouths. However, instead of firing forward, these rays of differing elements gathered in front of the three heads to form a tiny bullet while shining with every possible color. At the same moment Efil finished creating a white-hot fire arrow, Mdo also completed the bullet that, thanks to Compressed Eruption, was packed to the very limit of the destructive force she could condense.

::It shall be our honor to sound the starting gong of this battle with our arrow and bullet.::

An explosion rang out as Efil unleashed her Incendiary Arrow, which dealt a staggering amount of damage not through Blue Flames but by simply creating a massive explosion upon impact. It had no other bells and whistles; this was an attack designed purely to deal as much destruction as possible.

Close on the tail of that arrow was Mdofarak's attack, which went by the name of Sagittarius. Despite its appearance, this was much less a bullet than a laser shot from a cannon. It hugged the ground closely, melting the golems in its way like a hot knife through butter and generating a violent shock wave that blasted away everything in the vicinity of its path.

That path ran right through Team Kelvin, but Ange phased through it with her Unique Skill, Kelvin used Skill Eater to borrow said skill to do the same, and Sera remained entirely unhurt thanks to the protective barrier that Colette had cast

on her earlier while spewing a glittering rainbow.

Come to think of it, this is my first time seeing a serious attack made by Mdo in her dragon form, Kelvin noted.

::The light is very pretty...:: Sera trailed off before she started and grinned assertively. ::Looks like we have a clear path now. Yep, this went according to plan!::

::It's almost refreshing how fully we're leaning into just pushing through with brute force,:: Ange said dryly.

Clearly, Mdofarak had not cared about avoiding friendly fire. Even though they had known they would be fine, Kelvin and Ange had felt their stomach plunge a little, prompting them to exchange a wry look. Thanks to Mdo's decision, however, just as Sera said, there were no more golems standing between them and the city gates. At the same time, Efil's white arrow was still whistling towards the castle in a parabola.

Now then... Kelvin moved his legs quickly while keeping his gaze locked on the shooting star in the sky. His eyes were filled with expectation, but not in anticipation of seeing the castle collapse. No, what he was eagerly awaiting was how the other side would deal with this imminent threat. His passionate gaze was that of a young boy excitedly waiting to see how his favorite hero would get out of a predicament. *You'll surprise me, right?*

As always, the corners of his mouth drew upward in an evil-looking grin. And soon enough, his wish was granted. Right before the attacks were about to land, wind dyed such a vivid blue that it was visible to the naked eye sprang up out of thin air to form a beautiful cocoon that enveloped the castle. Soon, the white arrow and bullet made contact with this cocoon.

The Demon Lord Castle suddenly became the epicenter of an explosion of light and heat intense enough to cover the land. The Incendiary Arrow fired by Efil had generated an explosion that more than lived up to its name. In fact, it had contained so much force, it would have gouged away an entire mountain had it landed properly. To make matters worse, Sagittarius had pierced right through this violent churning energy, completing a duet of absolute calamity.

Everyone from Kelvin's side who beheld the sight in person thought

something along the lines of, *“Oof, we might’ve gone overboard,”* or *“Ah, the Demon Lord Castle’s dust.”* That’s how terrifying this “greeting” was. However, in the next moment, the battle junkie’s face bore the biggest smirk he had shown that day: the castle remained standing.

A mushroom cloud had formed due to Efil’s attack. The surface of the blue cocoon dented as if to stop the force of the explosion, then successfully bounced back like rubber. All the flames that were thus repelled quickly lost their intensity and fizzled out in midair.

Mdofarak’s attack, after destroying so many golems without faltering in the slightest, curved up at an angle in an effort to penetrate the cocoon from below. It made contact at the same moment as Efil’s attack and similarly began losing force. The power that was affecting these attacks failed to completely erase the projectile of compressed dragon breath, but it did manage to redirect the trajectory of the attack such that it slid across the elliptical surface of the cocoon before flying off harmlessly into the distance.

In the end, the Demon Lord Castle remained unharmed behind the blue cocoon.

Kelvin burst into excited laughter on the Network. *HA HA HA HA! What was that?! It freaking rebuffed both attacks!*

::Good for you, Kelvin!:: Sera smiled in response to the smile on his face.

Of course, even while doing a mental jig, the self-proclaimed “rational battle junkie” remembered to properly analyze what he had just witnessed.

That’s a barrier created from countless gusts of wind braided together. That structure gives it a high degree of adaptability that enables it to both soften and deflect attacks. A soft barrier, huh? That’s a new one. Interesting. Didn’t know that was possible. At first glance, it looks like a barrier made from Green Magic, but I’m pretty sure there’s something else at work. If it’s a Unique Skill, I doubt I’d be able to reproduce it even if I use Astarte’s Embrace to analy—

Ange chuckled. ::I know he can still focus just fine on fighting while going on like that thanks to Parallel Processing, but boy, do I see the similarities with Shutola-chan when she’s in researcher mode.::

::Huh? Me? Um, do I really get like that?: Shutola asked, abashed.

The party member who praised people for having something they could really get passionate about was, unsurprisingly, Kelvin.

How about you try this on for size?!

Kelvin used Fly to hop over the crimson wall surrounding the Demonic Capital, lifting his staff. In response, a massive magic circle appeared above the castle, completely covering the sky. Colette recognized this as the magic circle for calling out Summons. However, its scale was far greater than anything she had ever generated, and the admiration she felt brought a smile to her face that was as bright as Kelvin's. This was truly a workplace where everyone had wonderful smiles on their faces.

Boga, this is your first mission. It's a simple task: just push through with all your weight and power.

::RAAAWWRRRRRR!::

The black rock dragon that descended from the magic circle was far more gigantic than anyone those present had ever seen.

* * *

Tch. So they really did take the Flame Dragon King's power for themselves. Their team is just full of monsters now.

Bell pulled her face into a grimace. She was currently looking up at the sky through the ceiling of the throne room where she was located. Her detection abilities, which reached throughout the realm of Grebareika, enabled her to accurately determine and quantify the weight and size of the dragon king currently falling onto her castle.

The rock that used to cover Boga's body had turned into black lava rock from which sharp edges jutted out. The most conspicuous change about him, however, was his size. He now looked like a hulking mountain that weighed...well, a mountain's worth. The light of burning lava pulsed in between the cracks of the rocks on his body as massive fangs towered all the way up to his mouth. The stark change in Boga's appearance left no doubt in Bell's mind that he had taken up the mantle of Flame Dragon King.

Considering his size and the fact that he's coming straight down...he shouldn't be able to destroy Degradation Counter, but by the time the barrier's absorbed enough force to bounce him back, he would be touching the castle. Ugh, this is why I hate fighting Summoners. But, well...

Bell tapped the floor two or three times with her greaves, changing the flow of the wind it was expelling.

"It's not like it makes much of a difference."

* * *

Right after Boga appeared directly above the Demon Lord Castle, the blue cocoon showed signs of change. The wind gathered at the top, creating a much thicker barrier.

So that barrier can be made stronger or weaker at will. Oh, that's good. That's really good. However, that blue wind looks reeeeeeally similar to Bell's wind from the tournament at Gaun. In all likelihood, she's the one generating it.

Delight and disappointment rushed through Kelvin at the same time. He turned to look at Sera on a whim and found her coincidentally glancing his way.

Before he could say anything, Sera gave him a big smile. ::Bell is mine, right?::

After an excruciating pause, Kelvin nodded in reply. There was no room for negotiation here.

An instant later, Boga began his assault on the cocoon. He first unleashed a thunderous roar that created a huge dent in the cocoon's surface thanks to the significant power-up he had gained from Evolving. Then his massive form crashed into the dent with his huge fangs facing down, with the aim of puncturing the barrier. All the black rocks on his back also began spouting fire as if they were volcanoes exploding in unison. The stress on the barrier was incredible, and Boga got very close to touching the tip of the Demon Lord Castle.

However, Bell concentrated Degradation Counter solely where it was in contact with Boga. The strengthening wind began pushing the dragon back just as he noticed his own explosive power starting to weaken. He had gotten very close to breaking through the barrier, but it now seemed like he was at a much

higher risk of being repelled.

::Master, now that the barrier has been thinned at the side, I should be able to land an explosion directly on the castle. Would you like me to do so?: Efil asked as she nocked a new arrow.

I'd like to say our goal isn't to destroy the castle, so just leave it, but as they say, compassion isn't for the good of others. Go on and give them another big one!

::Understood. However, Master, there's a second part to that saying. I suspect it doesn't mean exactly what you think it does.::

Huh? Really?

For a moment, Kelvin was surprised that someone in this world understood a saying from Japan, but then he remembered that Torajian culture was largely influenced by his home country. He made a conscious effort not to let the fact that Efil had apparently surpassed him in her mastery of language get to him.

::Efil-nee, I sense someone approaching! They feel pretty strong. Might even have a Unique Skill!: Rion cried suddenly in warning. She definitely wouldn't react that way for mere golems, meaning there was something much more powerful currently heading for Team Efil's location.

While suppressing his disappointment that the enemy hadn't come for him instead, and praying to a certain gluttonous goddess inside his heart that it *would* be him next, Kelvin replied, *Efil, we'll handle things on this side. You focus on backing Rion up. Mdo, if you're free, prioritize giving Melfina's group cover fire. For some reason, I feel like someone might be approaching them too.*

Both Efil and Mdo acknowledged their orders.

Kelvin then turned his attention away from the Network to observe Boga still trying to push through Degradation Counter. *As I expected, Boga's power and the intensity of the eruptions on his back started going down from the moment he came into contact with that blue wind. I thought he'd be able to push through it by himself, but at this rate, it's only a matter of time before he's completely blown back.*

By now, Team Kelvin was already halfway from the city walls to the castle.

There were surprisingly few golems positioned inside the city itself, such that Sera and Ange, who were running ahead, proved more than enough to smash and destroy everything before Kelvin even got there. At their current pace, they would be reaching the Demon Lord Castle very soon.

Kelvin could save Boga all his trouble with a single swing of Boreas Death Scythe. However, this battle junkie was a sore loser when it came to fighting and considered that measure akin to admitting defeat. Furthermore, there was a big part of him that wanted to see what the other party was capable of.

That said, in a way, the strength of a Summoner's Followers is also his own strength. To that end...

Kelvin had zero intention of apologizing, but for formality's sake, he brought his hands together apologetically inside his head. The next instant, magic gathered in the sky again, forming another Summoning magic circle behind Boga's back. Of course, this meant the appearance of another Follower.

"R-Roar?!" Despite being fully in fight mode, Boga widened his eyes in astonishment as he watched a copy of himself descending from the magic circle. He struggled to understand why he was now accompanied by another Fire Dragon King who was his spitting image. However, the translucent black parts of this interloper's body helped him quickly put the puzzle pieces together in his head.

Kelvin grinned. *Apparently, the other party wants seconds. Clotho, devour to your heart's content.*

Indeed, the true identity of this false Boga was none other than Clotho, who had taken out the part of its body that it usually kept in Storage. It had always had the ability to make itself this big on command; there simply hadn't been an opportunity to do so before today. And because this particular clone now possessed almost all of the slime's battle-related stats, it was big *and* could very much hold its own in a fight of this level.

Moments ago, the barrier and Boga had been close to being equally matched. When Clotho was added to that equation, the balance was naturally broken. The combined load of the two dragons proved too much for the barrier to bear, and it began falling apart. Clotho extended fangs, coated in metal thanks to

Metalicize, to join the Fire Dragon King's awe-inspiring fangs in tearing the blue cocoon apart.

“Debilitate Scrimmage.”

A young girl's voice rang out from the Demon Lord Castle's roof. The speaker, Bell Baal, stood up, revealing blue armor over her legs, tail, wings, and horns. On top of the armor, she was also wearing purple greaves that looked specifically adapted to her transfigured form. Wind blew violently from vents in those purple greaves as if reflecting her current state of mind.

“ROOOAAAAAR!”

The clear hostility that Bell was emanating immediately made her the target of Clotho's and Boga's attention. They redirected their ferocious fangs her way while being further pulled down by gravity.

“Arg, I wasn't actually planning on showing myself today! You're not only traipsing around my home with your dirty shoes on, you're even trying to tear it down?! Just how did your parents raise you?!”

Bell planted her left leg firmly on the ground and swung her right leg upward sharply, unleashing a white-and-blue flying slash that was specialized for deflecting. At least, her left leg appeared to be firmly planted. The truth was that the sole of her foot was not actually touching the floor—in this case, the roof of the Demon Lord Castle. Clotho and Boga could not see this from their position, but Bell was floating a little bit off of the ground. Her transformed greave was enveloped with violently whirling winds that were keeping her steady in the air.

“ROAAAR!”

Boga unleashed another earsplitting roar as he and Clotho continued rushing downward. However, Bell did not falter in the slightest. Having finished her attack, she brought her foot back down, with annoyance being the only emotion on her face, just as the flying slash collided with her assailants with a shuddering boom.

The way that Boga chose to deal with the slash coated with blue wind was to bite down with his teeth, all of which were massive enough to crush any

human-sized target—never mind the diminutive Bell—from head to toe in one go. Just before he was about to shatter the attack, however, it exploded, forcing his mouth wide open instead.

Bell was not quite out of the woods yet. A beat later, just as she was left unprotected due to having finished kicking all the way through, Clotho's metal-coated dragon arm barreled towards her with the same destructive power as Boga's bite. The golems at the ground level would have been shattered to smithereens in the face of this force even if they had gathered together and braced themselves in defense.

"Piercing Purge."

Bell, however, had already finished making a counterattack. When she had raised her sinisterly transformed foot against Boga, she had also shot out three giant spears made of wind. These now pierced Clotho's fist without difficulty despite how much tougher the slime had become after turning into metal. Clotho itself remained unharmed, as it was practically impervious to all physical attacks that did not touch its core, but this exchange did succeed in completely nullifying the force of the fist it was throwing.

Hundreds of booms rang out within the brief window of the next few seconds as Clotho extended countless whips from its body and Boga used its massive form to deal attacks with the same weight as Gerard's sword swings. Bell parried, deflected, or countered everything using a single leg as she stood in the air with the other, making sure the roof of the castle did not get scratched in the slightest.

"*Tch!*"

Even Bell, a member of the Apostles, could not help but scrunch her cute face into a scowl while handling the fierce onslaught of both opponents. She was currently facing two monsters that were arguably at the top of this world's hierarchy of races while protecting the enormous castle at her back. While paying careful attention so that the shock waves from the attacks did not reach the castle, she manipulated the wind to erect a simple replacement barrier. She was at a serious disadvantage in this situation, and it seemed like it was only a matter of time before she fell or the castle started taking damage.

“Finally. Take this.”

All of a sudden, Bell stopped being on the defensive and thrust out her right foot with far greater speed than she had demonstrated so far. A blast of wind slammed into Boga and Clotho with such force that even their gigantic forms were sent flying, serving as a current that continued carrying them up, up, up and away.

“Can you not make me waste my stamina? I just woke up,” Bell grumbled while biting back a yawn. “I have low blood pressure in the mornings.”

“Raaawwrr!” Boga spread his giant wings and began expelling fire from them as if they were afterburners in a rough imitation of what his predecessor had done. He ended up flying in a keeling way that seemed reminiscent of a fighter jet that had lost control, giving the impression that he had yet to get used to his own abilities. Despite this, he managed to escape the gust of wind, though it took a while.

On the other hand, even though Clotho had taken Boga’s form, it did not actually have his flying abilities. Instead, it was capable of achieving a similar manner of flight by using Metalicize to create the very same Wind Jail Gems that Kelvin loaded his golems with. The slime generated its own jets of wind to recover its balance and hover in the air.

Once they had regained control over themselves, the two monsters turned back towards the Demon Lord Castle and opened their mouths wide, gathering magic and searing flames. The building Breath Attacks dazzling in the sky looked like a sun and moon.

“Stooooop!”

Just as the beams of light were about to burst forward, a loud voice that Clotho and Boga were extremely familiar with rang out. Despite the suddenness, the two immediately snapped their mouths shut.

Bell glared at the interloper. “Sera Baal.”

“I finally reached you! Going faster paid off, yep!”

Needless to say, it was Sera. She had her demon wings and horns visible as if she no longer felt the need to hide her identity. In one of her hands was a limp

golem that looked like a broken doll. She had come all the way up here to the roof of the Demon Lord Castle with it in her hand as if she had defeated it somewhere on the way and forgotten about it.

“Boga, you still haven’t gotten used to your new body after Evolving, right? It looked like you couldn’t use your flames properly either. For now, step back.”

“Roar...”

“I can’t really think of a proper reason, but you too, Clotho!”

Boga and Clotho exchanged troubled looks. They seemed to be asking each other, “What should we do?” in their silence, but it wasn’t as if they had any intention of defying Sera. So they mutually decided to obediently step back to spectate.

“Do you think I now owe you?” Bell scoffed. “I can handle all three of you at the same time.”

“I don’t have ulterior motives like that, and I’m not thinking of ganging up on you either. Clotho and Boga were only here to draw you out of the castle. They’ve done their part, and they did it well.”

“I can’t believe it. You had them attack my house for a reason like that? While you were destroying the golem in your hand? I know this might sound weird coming from a demon, but you lack common sense.”

“You say that, but have you forgotten that this is my house too? I came home and found myself being attacked by unknown forces. So I fought back. Now, doesn’t that sound like justified self-defense? Perfect logic!”

“Sera Baal, you... Has anyone ever pointed out that you have a tendency to only see things in a way that suits you?”

“I’m often told that I’m a positive person! I love that part of myself!” Sera smiled proudly and puffed out her chest. This made Bell focus on a certain point with a gaze filled with jealousy, but Sera failed to notice it. The way she was slow on the uptake only for this topic could be taken as proof of her talent in provoking other people.

“Bell! There are a mountain of things I want to ask you, but there’s something

we gotta do before that!”

“Which is...?”

Sera jabbed a finger in Bell’s direction. At the same time, the golem in her other hand broke off at the neck and crashed to the ground. Red-pupiled, almond-shaped eyes stared straight into each other as Blood Scrimmage naturally formed around both of Sera’s arms.

“You felt unsatisfied with our fight being broken up halfway through during the Beast King Festival, right? So we’ll first pick up where we left off. We can talk after we decide the winner!”

“A musclehead’s suggestion indeed. If that match had continued to its conclusion, there’s no doubt I would have won.”

“Oh? What a coincidence. I’m sure I would have won!”

“Hmph.”

In sharp contrast with Sera’s bright grin, Bell’s voice remained cold and disinterested. However, the blue wind whipping around her feet told another story—it spoke volumes about her confidence in her own victory.

“I hate it when people get passionate about things and involve me.”

“You say that, but you seem raring to go.”

Crack.

The armor of the golem on the ground let out a soft groan as it succumbed to the pressure in the air being emanated by the two demons. This prompted Boga and Clotho to exchange another look from high up in the air where they were. A split second was all it took for them to come to the agreement that things were getting dangerous and that they should back up even more.

“I’m ‘Condemner’ Bell Baal, Sixth Seat of the Apostles of Elearis. I condemn you to death as punishment.”

“I’m ‘Empress’ Sera Baal of House Celsius. This time, I’m making sure that we fight to the very end!”



At the same time, Team Melfina was in the open plains outside the walls of the Demonic Capital. The scene out here where they were hard at work mopping up the red golems that continued flowing out like a tide even after Team Kelvin had broken through the city walls was exactly what one would imagine a battlefield to look like.

Specifically, the fighting here looked like two actual armies clashing, as it was being carried out by golems that looked like knights and warriors. Shutola's twenty-five knight golems, which she had named Guards, individually only had the fighting potential of Rank A monsters. This meant they were greatly inferior to the golems protecting the Demonic Capital, which Bell had referred to as Cardinal Rages. At the same time, the Guards were also behind in quantity, being constantly outnumbered more than two to one, meaning they were permanently at a disadvantage.

Numbers One to Five, continue shooting to draw the enemy over. Number Seventeen, you're free now, so take a step forward to bait...

The princess was running her brain at full capacity while perched in her favorite position on top of Georgius. She was constantly employing all the military tactics she knew while keeping a full picture of the rapidly changing battlefield in her mind. Since her golems could not win one-on-one, she positioned them so that three of them could take on one of the enemies at any given time. Any normal person's brain would have been fried long ago from processing so much information all at once, but Shutola's brain did indeed have the capacity to pull it off. Her masterful control of the Guards turned them into elite troops that steadily finished off the Cardinal Rages one after the other.

The Guards were quite different from the standard golems watching over Kelvin's house. After receiving her golems from Kelvin, Shutola had modified them to her liking. One thing she had changed was their joints. Normal golems were programmed to imitate the movements of humans as closely as possible so they could move on their own. In contrast, the Guards were not bound by such limitations, as Shutola moved them manually through Puppetry. As a result, her golems' joints were doubly elaborate, having been designed to bend any which way and perform incredibly complex movements. Now, they had such a wide range of motion that Kelvin would have had a hard time just trying

to make them walk straight. In short, the Guards were tailor-made golems that only Shutola could use.

Number Fourteen and Number Twenty-One, fire your cannons.

One of the Guards that had been facing in a completely different direction turned around with only its torso to surprise a Cardinal Rage currently locked in combat with other Guards, puncturing it multiple times with a lance. The wide view that Shutola maintained of the battlefield and the Guards' ability to immediately carry out her orders proved to be a formidable combination that could exploit even the smallest of openings. The Cardinal Rages could work with each other as well as an army could, but the Guards' teamwork was far superior.

"Mel-sama, are you sure we do not need to help Shutola-chan?" Colette asked, worried from where she was spectating a distance away. Shutola had not yet gotten into a dangerous situation, but her opponents were clearly dangerous. When this gentlehearted saint saw her precious friend left to face such a situation alone, it only made sense for her to become distressed.

"She's doing just fine," Melfina replied. "In fact, this is the perfect opportunity for her to gain battle experience. It's not often we see so many Rank S monsters attacking all at once."

"It is just as you say, Mel-sama! Oh, Shutola-chan, how envious I am of you! I, too, wish for Mel-sama to bestow upon me sweet tribulation so I can prove my faith!" Colette's heavy breathing proved that this gentlehearted saint was indeed feeling distressed.

"I-I see."

"On another note, Kelvin-sama's Summoning just now was incredible. When he called out Boga-sama and Clotho-sama in quick succession, I was so moved, I nearly passed out. I managed to hold on, though. I impress myself sometimes."

"In exchange, you had 'tears' overflowing from your mouth too. Colette, you are the Oracle of Deramis. You should be more conscious of the fact that there may be believers watching you at any given moment. Thankfully, everyone who has seen your true self has been very understanding, but one slipup is all it takes. You must develop the firm will and ability to keep yourself in check."

“Oh, what blessed words! I shall strive to carry them out with every fiber of my being!” Colette vowed fervently as she got down and kneeled in a praying pose. However, her facial expression was extremely flushed, indicating that she likely had not internalized Melfina’s words.

Melfina sighed and massaged the area between her brows. *Personally, I’m more worried about Colette than I am about Shutola. She’s already thrown up and has had nosebleeds multiple times. I wouldn’t be surprised if she suddenly blacks out. I think assigning her to the same group as me might have been a mistake after a—*

When Melfina turned back to Colette, she found the Oracle looking at Shutola instead of her. Someone was rapidly approaching where the Guards were fighting the Cardinal Rages.

BOOOOOM!

“What just— Fall back!” Shutola cried.

A huge cloud of dust was kicked up, accompanied by a resounding crash. The two golem forces took advantage of this opportunity to withdraw and put some distance between each other. All that was left were the remains of dozens of destroyed Cardinal Rages and the large figure still enshrouded within the dust.

“I do not like the feel of this presence. Mel-sama, please give me permission to go help Shutola-chan.” Colette stood up, all traces of her previous expression gone. Now, she was every inch the resolute saint who carried the weight of her country on her shoulders.

Melfina sighed softly, then said, “Go.” *I forget sometimes—she really does pull through when it matters.*

As Colette rushed forward on the back of the Mystic Cougar she’d Summoned, Shutola deployed the Guards in front of her with their shields held up at the ready. It wasn’t long before the dust settled.

“The fuck? There ain’t nobody but women and children here! You pieces of junk were having a hard time against these opponents?! Well, I’ll be. I know m’lady was the one who gave the order, but I guess leaving our security to metal scraps was a mistake after all.”

The owner of the booming voice revealed himself to be a giant with four arms and three eyes. He was smaller than the Gigant that Lord Rion had previously fought in the Forest of Crests, but he had an extremely bulky body. He was emanating hostility so sharp it pricked everyone's skin.

"Are you okay, Shutola-chan?"

"I'm not hurt anywhere, and my Guards are fine too. I don't think we can beat this opponent without taking damage, though."

"I'll support you. Stay sharp!"

"Mm-hmm!"

"Hey, hey, hey! You lassies serious about fighting me? Give it up; trust me, you don't wanna do that. And I don't have a hobby of hurting women and children. That's a lame-ass hobby that's got nothin' to do with me. This here's private property belonging to demons, ya know. What you need to do is turn right around and go home. Else I'm gonna eat you up!"

The giant made shooing gestures with his large hands. He had a bad attitude, but for some reason, Shutola saw a shadow of her brother in this man. Was it because he had a wicked-looking face? Was it because of his battle junkie aura? Or was it because he seemed like the kind of person who'd take really good care of his little sister if he had one? Either way, Shutola felt emboldened to reply to him.

"We can't do that," she said. "We have a goal, and we're taking over this place for the sake of that goal."

"A goal, you say! And what is that goal?" the man asked.

Colette cut in. "We're in training to improve ourselves. In other words, we're farming experience points!"

"Whaaaat?!" Shutola's head whipped around as she stared at Colette with surprised eyes. This was news to her.

Colette brought her mouth to Shutola's ear and whispered, "Please don't worry. I'm just lying to deceive the enemy."

Shutola sighed softly in relief. "I-I see. I was just surprised because it was so

sudden.” Part of her was disappointed in herself for not having seen through the lie, but another part was thankful to Colette for being a trustworthy friend who stood with her. Now, whether Colette was actually lying or not was between her and her goddess.

The giant exclaimed, “You don’t say! Here I was, thinking you lassies nothing more than mere damsels when you were proper warriors building yourselves up! Can’t believe I didn’t see it. Ha ha ha, how embarrassing. But, well, that changes things.” The demon, having taken Colette’s words at face value, grinned as if comprehension had just dawned on him.

Melfina, who had been standing in the back, looked a bit troubled. “What will you do, then? Will you simply leave and let us be?”

“That’d be a darn shame, wouldn’t it? Now that I know what’s going on, I can’t very well leave it to these sorry excuses for replicas of Gustav-sama. You lot, don’t you dare interfere! My great self is gonna crush these brave warriors personally!”

The demon spread all four of his arms, assuming a threatening stance. Shutola and Colette immediately readied themselves for battle against this opponent who seemed to loom over them.

“I, Vegalzeld, the archdemon who mastered medicine and was responsible for maintaining m’lady’s health as one of the Four Demonic Generals, shall serve as your opponent!”

Both Shutola and Colette blinked in surprise, thinking in unison, *Oh, he’s a doctor.*

Contrary to his appearance and bearing, this was apparently a very book-smart demon.



Vegalzeld grinned fiercely as he clenched his fists, radiating fighting spirit and killing intent in equal measure. He dug his feet deep into the ground and slowly inched forward.

“One minute!” Shutola suddenly shouted from her position on top of Georgius, thrusting out both her hands.

“Huh?!” Vegalzeld nearly fell over as he braked in response. “Wh-What’s the matter? Do you have an upset stomach?”

“No, that’s not it. I was just thinking: do we really need to fight? We couldn’t talk with the golems, but we should be fine with you, right, Mr. Doctor?”

“Huh? What do you mean ‘fine’ with me?”

“Oh, now that you mention it...” Colette nodded. “Vegalzeld-sama seems like a rather reasonable person, despite how he looks.”

“Wait, what’s going on? Speak to meeee!”

“Unlike dearest brother Kelvin, I don’t like getting into fights when I don’t have to. It depends on the place and time too, but as a leader, I don’t like wasting stamina and resources when I can do something a different way.”

“Helloooooo!”

“I cannot agree more, Shutola-chan. I suppose it is common between all countries to always seek a peaceful solution first. Ahhh, we must thank the goddess for how filled with love this world is! Now, you too. Join us!”

“Are you seriously asking me, a demon, to worship the goddess?”

Shutola and Colette were starting to forget about Vegalzeld and chat between themselves. One of them was even entering a self-induced high.

Um, did I walk into a bunch of loonies? The Demonic General was regretting his decision a little.

Shutola cleared her throat. “Getting back to the topic at hand, Mr. Doctor, we don’t want to fight you. The golems over there attacked us first, and we were just defending ourselves.”

Vegalzeld narrowed his eyes. “Didn’t your companion say something about farming experience points?”

“Worry not,” Colette cut in smoothly. “That was a lie.”

“You... Aren’t you wearing the outfit of a holy servant from the overworld? Actually, never mind.” The demon sighed. “So, what is your *real* reason for being here? If you blow smoke up my ass one more time, I’m gonna bury you

two for real.”

“Thank you for the kind warning. We will keep it in mind.”

“Uh, I was hoping you two would be a bit more frightened.”

“Mr. Doctor, we only have one goal: we’re here to help dearest sister Sera come home.”

“Hah! Dearest sister Sera, is it? Well, it doesn’t matter what your goal is, I can’t actually let you thro— Wait, WHAT?! DID YOU SAY ‘SERA’?!”

At the end, Vegalzeld was shouting. Having expected it, Shutola and Colette managed to clap their hands over their ears in time.

“Are you talking about Sera-sama?! H-Hold on. No, I won’t believe you that easily. I’m gonna check if you’re lying by asking a few questions!”

“We don’t mind.”

Vegalzeld and Shutola stared into each other’s eyes as if they were in a shoot-out.

“What’s her favorite dish?”

“She calls it ‘demon-style curry,’ but it’s actually meat and potato stew.”

“What did she use to have trouble eating?”

“Bell peppers.”

“What’s her favorite fighting style?”

“A form of pugilism incorporated with Black Magic. How’s that? We got everyone right, didn’t we?”

“Are you freaking serious? Oh, Sera-sama...I’m so glad you survived.”

Shutola had no trouble answering all of Vegalzeld’s questions. Thanks to Perfect Memory, she never forgot anything she had ever seen or heard. This time, she didn’t even have to activate the skill, but even if there was a question she didn’t know the answer to, she could simply use the Network to ask Sera directly. As such, Shutola had been sure of her victory the moment Vegalzeld had brought up the idea of asking questions.

I was torn over whether to answer if he asked something weird like dearest sister Sera's three sizes, but whew, it looks like we managed to get him to trust us somehow. Then again, he didn't seem like someone who would ask such a mean question, so it's not like I was worried in the first place!

Of course, it wasn't that Shutola didn't know the answer to that question; she did, since she had bathed with Sera before. She wouldn't even have had to ask if it had come up. Again, whether she would answer was another matter entirely.

It seems like this doctor didn't know dearest sister Sera was alive. I guess Bell Baal, whom we think is dearest sister Sera's younger sister, didn't keep him informed. This mister is one of the Four Demonic Generals who once served Demon Lord Gustav and was killed by the previous Hero. Exactly what happened isn't clear, but I'm pretty convinced that he was revived by Estoria-san. Was it to face us if we ever came? If that's the case, then that must mean the other Demonic Generals...

Shutola's mind raced as she studied Vegalzeld without staring hard enough to arouse his suspicion. This demon wearing a suit of tough-looking Torajian-style armor that had likely been tailor-made to fit his muscular body was quivering with emotion as he covered his eyes with his hands. Based on the movement of his throat and other small details she picked up, she determined that he was not putting on an act.

"I'm sorry. You really do know Sera-sama well. She used to be such a little thing, and a little shy too. I'm so glad she's found friends outside. Thank you for getting along with her. If you're so close with her, I'm sure you know what's happening to this realm, right? Ah, no, I suppose me being here conversely complicates things. Oh, right, Sera-sama doesn't yet know about Bell-sama's existence, does she?"

Shutola nodded. "Dearest sister told us a lot, but honestly, there's still a lot we aren't sure of. We have our guesses, but if possible, we would like to exchange information. That includes how much you know about this age, Mr. Doctor. You're supposed to have died in the past, right?"

"Hah! You sure got a sharp head on your shoulders for such a small squirt.

You don't look scared of me even though I look the way I do. You're gonna be someone big one day, I assure you. And for some reason, I can't seem to read that white-haired lassie over there either. All right, let's have a proper conversation as fellow intellectuals."

Without ado, Shutola's group and Vegalzeld put their heads together to share what they knew. The demon confirmed that, just as Shutola suspected, the Four Demonic Generals—with the exception of Viktor—and Demon Lord Gustav had all been revived recently. However, he did not know anything about Estoria, the one who had supposedly brought them all back. The way he put it, he was back before he knew it, and that was that.

Vegalzeld slapped his thigh, guffawing. "I was doubly surprised because Bell-sama was right there in front of me when I came to!"

"So, um, is Bell-sama actually Sera-sama's younger sister?" Colette asked.

"Well, the existence of Gustav-sama's two daughters is one of Grebarelka's most protected secrets. But I am in your debt for all the care you showed Sera-sama, so I suppose I can tell you. The two are actually twins. For what it's worth, Sera-sama *is* the older one, so you're not exactly wrong."

"Huh?"

"What?"

"I know exactly what you want to say, but don't say it, especially in front of Bell-sama. She's got a complex about it, particularly regarding her chest size and all that."

The Demonic General went on to reveal that Sera and Bell used to be twins who looked like mirror images of each other, at least until they reached ten years old. One characteristic of demons was that their appearance would stop changing once they reached a certain age. Exactly what age that was varied from person to person, and it just so happened that Bell hit hers much sooner than Sera did.

"Gustav-sama was the one who decided to hide the young ladies and raise them in separate mansions built deep underneath the castle. At the time, Grebarelka was in the middle of a huge war and there were many demons that,

being demons, were up to no good. Just between you and me, Gustav-sama was a seriously doting parent. He took every single measure possible to ensure the safety of the young ladies' homes and prevent their information from leaking. And it wasn't entirely uncalled for; there was this crazy powerful vampire with bloodshot eyes who would attack the castle every so often. Gustav-sama would defeat her every time, but she had ridiculous recovery powers that brought her back before long. You could look in her eyes and tell she'd gone insane. Hmm? Now that I come to think of it, maybe *she* was the reason Gustav-sama went to such lengths... Nah, it can't be! Ha ha ha! Look at me, jumping to conclusions!"

Colette exchanged a look with Shutola and said, "To think there are people like that in this world..." as the other chimed in with, "Sounds scary." The truth, however, was that they both thought chances were high that Vegalzeld had hit the nail on the head. Based on what they had heard of Gustav from Sera, they could easily imagine him saying, "Don't let the two of them see that monster! It's bad for their education!"

"Now, as for how much I know about the current age...to be frank, I know almost nothing. Bell-sama forbade us from leaving Grebarelka, and no information came in. Gustav-sama is as sweet on her as always and insists that we all just listen to what she says. Today was my first time being sent outside the castle and, well, here we are."

Shutola tilted her head cutely. "So, in effect, Bell-san is now the ruler of Grebarelka?"

"Hm? Well, I guess you could say that. Generally speaking, Gustav-sama can't say no to anything Bell-sama says. There was a part of me that wanted to go out and search for Sera-sama, so I'm glad she's coming to us. Speaking of, that reminds me that I haven't asked you guys about her. I know that the Hero managed to get into this castle because I had already been killed somewhere else but I've no idea what actually happened."

"What I have is secondhand information, but I can give you a rough summary if you want."

Vegalzeld asked for it, so Shutola told him of how Sera had escaped to the

overworld and was found by Kelvin, Kelvin's promise to Viktor, and now her homecoming. Despite having heard it quite a while ago—from Sera and Kelvin—Shutola still managed to give a good, succinct telling while adding embellishments here and there that propped Kelvin up.

“K-Kelvin! What a great guy he is!” Vegalzeld was bawling his eyes out, indicating the success of Shutola's scheme. “I'm back for some reason, so you can't visit my grave. In exchange, we'll give you the biggest welcome we can! All right, I'll talk to Bell-sama for y'all!”

“I think there's probably no need for that. I'm sure she's meeting dearest sister Sera very soon.”

“You sure? In the first place, Bell-sama's existence should've been a secret even to Sera-sama. How does she even know about her?”

“The two happened to meet each other recently. Just about now—”

BOOOOOOOOM!

Shutola pointed at the top of the Demon Lord Castle the very moment it was rocked by a massive explosion.

“Look at how much fun they're having playing together. This reunion was a long time coming, so let's not interrupt it. It'd be terribly bad form to do so.”

“Ohhh! As expected of Gustav-sama's beloved daughters! They're similar even in the way they think!”

For some reason, this sight was what proved the most convincing to Vegalzeld that Sera was truly back.

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“Ahhh, I see, I see. So y'all came all the way here through the Boundless Poison from the overworld. Y'all are cool!”

Shutola's group was enjoying a lively conversation while spectating the fight between the demon sisters. Melfina had joined them some time earlier, going so far as to spread out a picnic sheet and take out lunch boxes made by Efil.

“I was asleep on dearest sister Mel's back the whole time, so I actually don't remember anything about it.”

“Don’t downplay yourself. Being able to sleep in that poisonous hell is sufficient proof that you’re pretty incredible.”

“I agree.” Melfina nodded. “You were in the middle of Evolving at the time, so you should have relied on the rest of us even more. Oh, do you mind if I take that piece of fried chicken?”

“Sure, go on.” Vegalzeld held out his lunch box, allowing the goddess to pluck out a piece of yellow savory perfection.

“Thank you! Mmmmm! Efil’s cooking really is without compare.” The goddess squealed in delight, clapping a hand to her cheek. Ignoring the heavily panting weirdo at her side, this was a very harmonious scene.

“I can agree with that. We demons usually don’t know the first thing about cooking. There are those who just naturally got better over time, but what they made was far from this. We would love to have that Efil you mention work for us.”

“Dearest sister Efil loves dearest brother Kelvin very much, so that’s one hundred percent impossible. She’d probably say ‘no’ no matter how big the country is.”

“That so? Darn shame. We got a seat empty right now, so she could’ve become one of the Four Demonic Generals.”

“Um, so even non-demons can be a Demonic General?” Shutola’s voice gradually faded near the end. *Isn’t that just the Four Generals, then? But I guess everyone has different ideas of what’s a good name, so I probably shouldn’t say this out loud.*

“That aside, the pretty lassie just mentioned you Evolving, didn’t she? You’re, uh, Shutola, right? I’ve heard that it’s quite rare for humans to Evolve, but you managed it at such a young age. You really are incredible.”

“Am I really? My dearest brother and sisters—even my grandpa—are stronger than me, so I’ve never really felt it. Oh, I think I might be able to beat Dahak now.”

“You just might,” Melfina agreed. “Ask him for a match when he gets back.”

Vegalzeld looked at the two's faces in turn. "The only Evolved humans that I've ever seen were the Hero's party members, and even then, not all of them were Evolved. You guys wouldn't happen to be partied up with the next Hero, would you?"

Hero Serge was the one who had killed him, so the demon was understandably somewhat guarded against Heroes.

"Aha ha, I'm not a Hero," Shutola giggled. *Though the current one is my friend.*

"Unfortunately, neither am I." Melfina smiled elegantly. *Though I am the goddess who facilitated the Heroes' transmigrations.*

"My lowly self? Never!" Colette waved a hand furiously in denial. *Though I did summon Touya's group.*

"What a relief! Ha ha ha!"

The three here thought they heard a certain dual-wielding little sister Hero sneeze over the Network.

"Not to toot my own horn, but I ain't no pushover either. Previously, the head of the Demonic Generals, Sebasdel, was the only one who had reached archdemon. After we were brought back, however, Bell-sama's been practically killing us with training. After I literally came back from the verge of death, lo and behold, I had also Evolved into an archdemon! I did start off already having a pretty high level, though; that might have had something to do with it."

"So...death training? Like a really intense boot camp? Yeah, I see the similarities between the sisters." Shutola looked off into the distance as the memories of Touya's group suffering under Sera's tutelage came back vividly.

"Does that mean all of the Four Demonic Generals have recently Evolved?"

"Aside from Sebasdel, who was already archdemon from before, yep. Just between you and me, Gustav-sama's improved more than the rest of us by far because he was trying to show his daughter his best side during training. Honestly, he's gotten a lot stronger than when he was Demon Lord."

"My! That sounds wonderful. I'm sure this news would make dearest brother really happy."

“A father who does his best for the sake of his daughter. Familial love is such a beautiful thing!”

“Uh, your reactions are very different from what I expected.”

The previous Demon Lord had been resurrected and strengthened. It was easy to forget, but this was news that normal people would interpret as a harbinger of the world ending. Gustav wasn't just any old guy doing his best who was happy to be trained by his daughter. He was a Demon Lord, a being who already had the power to destroy the world.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to Melfina. “Oh, that's right. If Gustav is here, then we'll have to let him know about the other thing.”

“You mean...” Understanding dawned on Shutola's face. “Yeah, you're probably right. Dearest brother can't *not* tell him.”

“What's this? What're you talking about? Did something good happen to Sera-sama?”

“Yep! It's happy news. After all, it's dearest brother Kelvin and dearest sister Sera getting engaged! He's gotta pay his respects properly, right?”

“That sounds happy indeed! Letting Gustav-sama know of Sera-sama's engage—*perrrrft!*” For some reason, Vegalzeld suddenly vomited blood.

“What's wrong, mister?!” Shutola cried.

“Wait a... Please, give me a... Uh, what did you just say?”

“Um, dearest sister Sera is engaged t—”

“*HAPERFFTT!*”

This time, Vegalzeld vomited blood with such momentum that he did a backflip too. He was so much more shocked than Galia had been that his actions were turning incomprehensible.

“Are you okay, mister?!”

Vegalzeld panted heavily. “I'm not okay, but I'm...I'm okay. But never mind me. You're in trouble! You're all in great trouble! All of you really should leave this place, and quick! If Gustav-sama finds out about Sera-sama being engaged,

he'll kill you for being related to whoever it was who dared do such a thing!"

"What?"

"Gustav-sama is always a demanding person, but that part of him gets amplified many times when it comes to his daughters! He won't go easy even on women and children like I would!"

"Ah, so you really were going easier on us. Thank you, Mr. Doctor."

"Don't change the subject! And forget what I just said. If Gustav-sama gives me a direct order, I'll have no choice but to obey. I can let you go only now when Gustav-sama still doesn't know. He's higher up the chain of command and can seize control of these pieces of junk any time. Go now, while you still can! You're actually gonna get eaten, for real this time!"

Vegalzeld leaped to his feet and spread his arms threateningly, all the composure that he had shown so far completely gone.

"Um, mister, dearest brother has already gone inside the capital. We're really thankful for the warning, but we can't run away. Not by ourselves."

"I hate saying this, but give up on that Kelvin fella. It's very likely that Gustav-sama will be trying and executing the guy himself. So, give up. That's all I can say."

The demon looked deadly serious. Shutola, Colette, and Melfina were all masters of reading people, but even if they hadn't had their abilities, they would have been able to read his desperation loud and clear.

"I see. I knew it; you really are a nice person, Mr. Doctor. But again, we really can't do what you say."

"I agree with Shutola-chan. Abandoning Kelvin-sama, someone the equal of the goddess, is absolutely unthinkable."

The Golden Sage and Silver Saint both stood up. Shutola clambered onto the back of Georgius as her twenty-five guards clanked over with their large shields to assume a defensive position in front of her. At the same time, Colette sat sideways on the back of her large stone lion, Mystic Cougar, who then got up with a fierce snarl.

“You...are fools. Looks like I’ll have to stop you myself, even if I have to knock you out to do so. Now that I’ve become a Demon Gigant Lord, my power is on par with the Demon Lords of the ages!”

The two sides faced each other with burning conviction. They were just about to leap into action when Melfina suddenly said, “Ah, sorry, give me a minute please. I need to get out a new lunch box and move my tarp.”

The other three watched as the goddess quickly wolfed down the rest of her second lunch box and grabbed the edge of her picnic sheet to drag it quite a ways back. When she was satisfied with how far away she was, she lowered herself back onto the sheet, sitting primly. To finish, she poured herself a cup of tea from a thermos and fetched a fresh lunch box from Clotho’s Storage.

After taking a sip and sighing contentedly, Melfina finally said, “Thank you for waiting. Go on; please start.”

The demon thought, *Way to go, taking the wind outta my sails...*

The princess thought, *I see, so dearest sister Mel is telling us to defeat Mr. Doctor by ourselves! Just like what she did with Rion-chan before, she’s now giving us a trial that’s meant to help us surpass our limits!*

The Oracle thought, *As expected of Melfina-sama—she’s always so unapologetically herself. This is her lesson to us to never lose sight of ourselves no matter the situation! Melfina-sama, I have properly received your divine teaching!*

The goddess thought, *Oh? The rolled omelet in this box is soy sauce-flavored. Efil went so far as to use different seasoning for each box? Her attention to detail never ceases to impress!*

In short, varying thoughts were running through everyone’s minds as preparations for the fight were finally made.

“You three aren’t coming at me all at once? You sure think highly of yourselves, leaving one to merely spectate.”

“Sure, we can win really easily if dearest sister Mel helps us. But this is our own problem, so we’ll solve it ourselves!”

Colorless magic threads thrummed, immediately making the Guards commence firing their Gatling guns through the gaps in their shields. Their shooting went on and on without end as their lance-guns had tiny Clotho clones tucked away inside that gave them access to a near limitless source of MP—this allowed them to keep going without ever worrying about running out of bullets. Conversely, the bottleneck was the heating up of the guns, but this was an issue that could be resolved by separating the golems into groups and having the groups take turns firing. The only way to stop these golems was to charge forward while fully exposed to the barrage of bullets or to return fire with a long-range attack.

Ow! Hmm, each bullet by itself isn't all that powerful, but the ability to keep it up for so long is quite impressive. I admit I'd underestimated the strength there is in numbers. However...

Vegalzeld charged forward with two of his four arms crossed over his face protectively and the remaining two clenched into fists. “Even a thousand of these mosquito bites are nothing compared to a single punch from Gustav-sama!”

The Gatling bullets failed to make him wince, much less falter, as they merely bounced off his muscular body. This barrage that could instantly shred all Rank A monsters was apparently like nothing more than insect bites to him. In fact, it wasn't even that.

He's faster than I thought!

Shutola had thought Vegalzeld would take a while to hit his top speed due to his bulk, but he managed it in the blink of an eye and had reached the Guards in an instant. He arrested his momentum right in front of the row of high-quality shields forged by Kelvin, his arm pulled back.

“Just sayin', you attacked first!” Vegalzeld yelled before landing a hook on the shield at the far end. His arm followed through, completely pulverizing shield and golem, then doing the same to the second and third golems in the row. Only when he reached the fourth one did his fist come to a stop, having ruined the Guard's shield so completely that it dropped it with a heavy thud. Even though he had been held back quite a lot, he still ended up destroying three of

Shutola's pawns with his very first attack.

Before the fight began, Colette had actually cast a simple barrier on the front line of golems. She would have used her esoteric Oracle spells, but she didn't have enough MP—forcing herself to pull it off would have involved another very colorful rainbow. Although these barriers did indeed get broken, they had served their purpose. What's more, they were not the only thing dampening Vegalzeld's attack.

When did these strings...?

The instant the demon had thrown his punch, Shutola had wound her threads around his arms and legs. She was equipped with Goddess's Magi-Threads, a magic item created by Melfina that could stretch longer and get tougher the more MP it was charged with, all the way until it could be used to dice monsters up. Now, however, even though it was indeed digging deep into Vegalzeld's skin, it was not quite strong enough to sever his limbs.

"You're really tough, Mr. Doctor."

"You bet I am! You're not doing bad either. That string of yours is doing a heck of a lot more than those pea shooters!"

Vegalzeld used brute force to make his body move in spite of the threads entangling him. He blocked the lances that five Guards were thrusting at him with an arm as thick as a log, allowing them to stab him only skin-deep before flexing his muscles to trap them in place. The lances continued firing at point-blank range, but the bullets only singed him a little.

"Useless! Everything you try against me is useless!"

The demon threw a punch again, taking another three Guards out of commission. Colette's buffs were holding fast, and Shutola was still playing interference with her threads, but the Demonic General made steady progress wading his way through the crowd of golems towards the two girls.

"Well, come on, now!" Vegalzeld cried in a booming voice. "Didn't you say that you don't like wasting resources as a leader?! What's all this, then, Shutola?!"

"But I'm not wasting anything!"

“What do you m— Ugh!”

Vegalzeld was suddenly trussed up so tightly that he could not move any longer. He looked over and witnessed the bizarre sight of the golems he had destroyed earlier spewing spools of thread as if to bolster and add on to the original threads that Shutola was using.

“These golems were made exactly the way I wanted them. They’re packed with wool spun from my magic, so they can continue fighting and being useful no matter what state they’re in. Just like this!”

Threads pulled fragments of destroyed golems towards Vegalzeld. His eyes widened. “Huh?! The inside of the armor is—”

For the first time, the Demonic General groaned with pain. And well he should, because the inside of the Guards’ armor was lined with large, razor-sharp barbs. Kelvin had forged all these barbs himself, ensuring that they had ultimate penetrating power. When gathered, the armor pieces resembled a torture device.

“And I’m still here too!” Colette’s Mystic Cougar suddenly burst out from behind Vegalzeld’s back and, taking advantage of him being wide open, tore through his throat.

“Wha— That stone lion managed to hurt me, meaning there’s something special about it!”

“An impenetrable defense is, when used the other way, an unstoppable offense. I have tricks up my sleeves too!”

What Colette had done was cast Tabernacle, the Oracle spell that created a barrier impervious to all but something on the level of Kelvin’s scythe, on Mystic Cougar’s fangs. In general, adjusting the size of barriers was surprisingly difficult and required a practiced hand. What Colette was working with here, though, was a Rank S barrier, something as hard to control as it was powerful. Making it fit the beast’s teeth was possible only thanks to her unbelievable talent and effort. Once it was cast, however, it converted the fangs into indestructible swords.

“I get it. I get it now! Ha ha ha! So that’s how it is. You two really *are* warriors!

It might be a bit immature of me to use this against kids, but I'll show you my ultimate move!" Vegalzeld's third eye shone with an ominous glow, then whirlpools of light sprang up around his four fists. "Transform!"

The giants were massive demihuman monsters. There was a certain degree of variation in their sizes, but even the smallest members of their race easily surpassed two meters in height. Their massive size automatically made them a threat, even to adventurers. Many were designated Rank B monsters, as they possessed enough strength to completely wipe the floor with entire groups of run-of-the-mill adventurers who only had a tiny bit of strength to write home about.

There was a fact about them that Trycen had confirmed but never informed the general public of; namely, there was a small subset of particularly powerful giants who possessed Transformation, a race-specific Unique Skill. Activating this Unique Skill healed all physical wounds and temporarily elevated the user to a higher plane of existence. In other words, this skill was a pseudo-Evolution. Once used, however, it could not be used again for a few days. What's more, it placed an inordinate amount of stress on the body.

In exchange, the user's physical capabilities rise sharply while Transformed, and, in some cases, they temporarily gain new abilities. Does Mr. Doctor here have giant blood in him on top of being a demon? Oh well, it doesn't really matter. Regardless, we know through our tests on Gigant Lord that these giants are petrified and left wide open for a short while when they Transform. We have to make the most of this opportunity!

Shutola gave the threads tied to her pinkies a small tug, making the Guards on either side stand up and lift their Gatling guns.

Aim for Mr. Doctor's third eye. Fire at will!

When Vegalzeld had charged in at the start of the fight, he had used his arms to cover his face, and Shutola had made a mental note of it. Naturally, Shutola did not know the trope that you weren't supposed to attack people in the middle of their transformation scene and therefore did not hesitate at all in ordering her golems to fire at the demon's eyeball, filling the air with the sound of rapid gunfire. Being unable to lift his arms, the demon was but an immobile

target at the moment.

Even though Vegalzeld had extremely tough skin, his eyeball was, like those of all other living creatures, akin to being an exposed part of his brain and thus was extremely fragile. The remaining nineteen Guards all fired with unerring accuracy, causing visible signs of damage.

“This also seems like a good time to rob him of his mobility,” Colette commented, joining Shutola in exploiting this brief window of opportunity. Mystic Cougar darted behind the demon to sever his Achilles tendon and was about to retreat when the light that Vegalzeld was emanating faded abruptly.

“Powerful and merciless. Good, good. Very demonic. I now understand why you and Sera-sama get along so well!”

Not much had changed with Vegalzeld’s appearance except that his hands now glowed faintly. As Shutola and Colette had timed it so that their attacks landed right after Vegalzeld’s transformation was over, his third eyeball and Achilles tendon remained severely wounded.

“However, don’t forget that I’m a doctor. Now that I’m Transformed, I can do this.”

The demon burst through the swathes of threads wrapped around his body with brute strength to bring his right hand to his eye and left hand to his ankle. A soft, enveloping white light emanated from the palms of his hands that completely healed the nearly fatal injuries he had suffered. The eye that had been punctured a moment prior was as good as new and glinting with a dangerous light.

Next, Vegalzeld brought his hands to the threads still entangling his body. A different light—one that seemed quite similar to the White Magic used by Melfina—melted through these bindings with ease, returning control of his body to him. Hesitant to charge in, Shutola had her golems continue firing as her mind raced to analyze what she was seeing.

“Y’see, I can’t use magic. But when I’m in this state, I can do something that’s kinda like White Magic. I use it when there are heavily wounded patients I can’t treat with my usual medical techniques. I can get through your magical restraints too, like so. If you guys know Sera-sama well, then you should get it if

I describe this as the opposite of being a Cursed Pugilist.”

Shutola nodded begrudgingly. “Yeah, that’s a good description.”

In addition to having steellike defense, Vegalzeld could heal all fatal wounds in the blink of an eye. Shutola knew a certain dragon who fought in the same reckless way, so she was very familiar with how troublesome it was to face this type of fighter. Under the circumstances, trying to slowly pile on the damage over time was not going to work. The only way was to hit him with one big attack that rendered him unconscious or create a situation where he could no longer heal.

“Another thing. That cleric over there. Matching the timing of your attack with Shutola and doing it right after my transformation was a great idea. However, you were a bit too careless coming close. Look what I got.”

Vegalzeld opened his hand, revealing one of Mystic Cougar’s legs. The demon had smashed the Summon’s leg at the same instant it had bitten his Achilles tendon.

“Would you not have noticed if I didn’t tell you? Well, you can have this back!”

The demon threw the leg back with an overhead throw like it was a fastball. Being as large as he was, he also had very long arms, which enabled him to let go at an abnormally great height. The cougar’s leg flew straight at Colette with incredible speed.

“Ugh!”

Evasion was impossible. In reaction to the oncoming bullet of death, Colette desperately activated Summon to call out Angel Statue right in front of her. The reason she chose Angel Statue was that she had cast three barriers on it ahead of time in preparation for precisely this situation. Her reaction was almost reflexive thanks to all the mental training she did daily.

An instant later, the attack landed on Angel Statue, smashing through the first and second barriers straight away. The third one finally stopped it but was left extremely cracked. Everything had happened in a fraction of a second, but Colette’s back was drenched in cold sweat.

“Hey, not bad!”

Vegalzeld’s voice sounded way too close. Already standing right in front of Angel Statue, he unleashed a horizontal chop with the edge of his hand that not only destroyed the last barrier but decapitated the Summon itself. The head flew off into the distance and crashed into an unlucky Guard, pulverizing its torso.

“But you’re done.” Vegalzeld reached for Colette with the two arms on the other side of the hand that he had done the knife chop with.

Of course, Shutola was not going to just let that happen. She sent all eighteen remaining Guards charging forward with their lances held up and spitting out bullets. Threads poured out from the gaps in their armor, creating a tsunami that sought to overwhelm and immobilize.

“I told ya, it’s all useless!” Vegalzeld swung a hand clad in light that erased the incoming threads. Clearly, they no longer had the ability to restrain him, and the Guards’ attacks could only buy a tiny bit of time. However, that tiny bit of time made all the difference.

“Go!” Colette leaped off Mystic Cougar and directed it to lunge at Vegalzeld. Thanks to the cover provided by all the surrounding Guards, the king of beasts managed to sink its unbreakable fangs deep into the demon’s head.

“Ha ha!” The demon grabbed the stone statue with his giant hands and crushed it into a million pieces. The fangs remained buried in his head, but not only was he not dead, he was still running high. However, he suddenly realized a large shadow had fallen over him, cutting him off from the light of the red moon.

“Heads up!”

The figure descending from above was none other than Shutola’s giant teddy bear, Georgius. It had its two paws pressed together and was bringing them down on Vegalzeld’s head like a double sledgehammer. Just like the cougar’s fangs, the bear’s claws were clad in Tabernacle.

Urp, doing it twice was... No, we have to push through!

Colette squeezed out every last drop of her remaining MP to use Summoning

one more time. Directly above Vegalzeld's head and right next to Georgius, a magic circle appeared.

::I'm counting on you, Captain Cliff...::

::I'm on it!::

The captain of Deramis's revered Holy Order of Knights, Cliff Strogav, leaped out, clad in full armor. He swung his sword in a mighty attack that joined the blow from Georgius, the greatest attack in Shutola's arsenal. Both landed directly on Vegalzeld's head exactly where he still had the fangs buried deep inside.

"What—?!"

"Did it w—?"

"Oh, I felt that one all right. If your levels had been just a bit higher, I just might have lost!"

The demon's wounds disappeared as if time were being rolled back. Not only that, he even caught the knight and teddy bear before they reached the ground.

"Ugh, what a blunder!" Cliff lamented.

Shutola sighed. "I didn't expect you to be so tough."

"Ha ha, I surprise even myself!" Vegalzeld chuckled. "So, you guys all out of options? If you are, then it's time for lights out."

"Well...we do still have one last thing, but if we use it, it'd be the same as admitting that we lost."

"And that is...?"

Shutola took a deep breath, then shouted, "Dearest sister Mel, heeeelp!"

This caught Vegalzeld off guard, and his eyes widened in astonishment. Before he knew it, the girl who had been leisurely eating on her picnic sheet was standing right next to him with a spear in hand.

"You two did well against an opponent as strong as a Demon Lord. You both get a gold star."

"Huh? And here I was wondering what your trump card could be. It's just this

lassie joining the fig—”

The haft of Melfina’s lance crashed down on the Demonic General’s head faster than he could react. He collapsed to the ground with a comical *thud* as the light faded from his third eye and hands and his eyes rolled to the back of his head.



Team Efil was positioned a distance away from the Demonic Capital. This was the group with Efil, Mdofarak, Rion, and Alex serving as, respectively, a bomber, a sniper, and a mobile strike force. They were the farthest from the main action, with Efil and Mdo safely situated at the top of a hill. However, someone who wasn’t a golem was fast approaching them. Rion and Alex, being the first to sense this, headed over to intercept them while destroying the golems in their way.

“Hi, hi! It’s such a nice evening, isn’t it? Can I convince you not to come this way?” Rion asked in a friendly voice with a smile while pulling her sword out from a Cardinal Rage that had gone dark. Her question, which was delivered in a warm tone like one might adopt when speaking to a neighbor one was well acquainted with, was directed towards a demon who looked like a large snake.

This demon had no legs but had arms attached to a long torso and was, for some reason, holding a sketchbook in one hand. He studied Rion wordlessly as his tongue occasionally flicked out of his mouth with a soft hiss.

“Um, do you mind if I call you Mr. Snake, then?”

“Not ‘Mr. Snake.’ I am Reinhart, one of the four Demonic Generals in the service of the great Demon Lord Gustav.”

“And I’m Rion. Nice to meet you!”

“Hmph. Girl, for what reason are you destroying the troops of our territory?”

“I mean, they attacked us first. We’re just fighting back!” Rion shrugged.

Reinhart’s snakelike pupils rotated as he glared harder. “They attacked you because you’re trespass—”

“By the way, Hart-chan! Did you happen to once be the king of a country

called Doktorია?”

““Hart-chan’?!”

The way Rion continued chatting amicably threw Reinhart into a visible fluster. He almost dropped his sketchbook as his eyes moved about even more furiously than before.

“You see, the current king’s name is Galia Kudo, and he looks like a bull. He told us that the founder of Doktorია was a demon named Reinhart who used to be a member of the Four Demonic Generals. You share the same name and the same title, so I was wondering if you’re him. Oh, Kudo-chan showed us the painting you did of Sera-nee! You’re so good!”

“Oh, heck, y’all are friends with Galia? You shoulda said that earlier!”

All of a sudden, Reinhart dropped the dignified way he was speaking earlier and slipped into a dialect that, for some reason, sounded kind of fake.

“Yep! Is that the way you normally speak, Hart-chan?”

“Uh-huh. Old habits die hard, what with how long I was playing king for. But I’m sho’ you’ve heard all this from Galia already. Like ya said, I’m Reinhart, founder of Doktorია and its first-generation king. Others call me the art tutor of the Four Demonic Generals. Nice meetin’ ya!”

“I’m happy to meet you too!”

“Ha ha ha! You got a little somethin’ special in ya. Somethin’ that really warms demons to you. It’s like...you’re really easy to talk to. You’re a charming little thing, you.”

“Really? Aha ha, thank you. By the way, Hart-chan...”

“Shoot.”

“Can you stop releasing your poison?” Rion maintained her tone and smile as she gave Aklama a sharp swing. The oil-like substance dirtying the blade from when it had pierced a Cardinal Rage earlier splattered onto the ground, creating a black stain.

Reinhart looked into her eyes, then sighed. “So you noticed. My poison’s supposed to be odorless and transparent. You have a cute face, but you’re a

frightening one, aren't you?" His eyes dilated again, either from surprise or appreciation.

Ever since he'd arrived here, Reinhart had been releasing a nerve agent potent enough to paralyze a whale through the gaps between the scales on his body. This was a poison that was supposed to go entirely unnoticed while it slowly but surely brought a target down. Unaware that Rion had sensed what he was doing, he had responded to her friendliness in a friendly way while waiting for her to collapse.

"You might be trying to hide it, but it's pretty obvious when we're this close. Just saying, I'm impervious to all poison and illnesses. Nothing's gonna change no matter how long you wait."

When Absolute Purification was activated to detoxify poison, it gave off a visual effect that Rion could see. As such, there was no way she wouldn't notice poison in her vicinity. In other words, she had seen through Reinhart's scheme from the very start. Even in the one in a million chance that Absolute Purification was nullified and poison entered Rion's system, it still wouldn't affect her, as she possessed Vigor at Rank S. Consequently, the friendly chat with Reinhart was just that: a friendly chat. Reinhart's race, the evil venom demons, had mutated to specialize in poison through the ages only to now find their ultimate counter in Rion.

"What the heck?! Poison doesn't work on you?! Now that's just straight-up cheating!"

"Really, Hart-chan? Who's the one who tried to deceive me with poison again?"

"Wait, you're gonna keep calling me that? Well, not that it matters. I was thinking of taking you in without hurting ya 'cus it sounded like you were acquainted with Sera-sama, but...looks like I don't have a choice." Reinhart cast a look at the book in his hand.

"Your face is saying you're still up to something, Hart-chan. I don't really want to fight someone who knows Sera-nee either, but..."

"I can't just let you walk away after you trashed so many of our golems, can I? Well, watch and be surprised. I'll show you my Unique...Skill...huh?"

Reinhart stopped speaking when he felt his right hand suddenly getting heavy. Before he could comprehend what was happening, the weight rapidly increased until he found himself with his hand touching the ground.

Why is my right hand suddenly— Heck, that ain't it! It's not my hand that's getting heavy, it's my sketchbook! It's being pulled into the shadow on the ground!

There were shadowy hands grabbing the sketchbook and tugging at it with incredible force. Before long, the entire pad was sinking into the ground. Reinhart took a better look and realized that these hands were extending from Rion's own shadow.

"Kel-nii would probably have given you a chance to show what you can do, but unfortunately, I still have a long way to go when it comes to fighting. So I'm going to stop you while I still can."

Plop.

"What—?!"

The book completely disappeared into the shadowy bog. Reinhart desperately clawed at the spot on the ground, but it had reverted to being mere dirt. While he was distracted, three new shadowy hands shot forward and wrapped around his body, squeezing tighter and tighter.

"Hah! You think you can squeeze me, a snake? That's a funny— Ow! Sorry, no! Stop! That seriously hurts!"

"If we could've resolved things just by talking, then I'd have done that. But you went and tried to trick me, so I ended up having to make a move first. You'd prefer the pain to be over quickly, right?"

Another shadowy hand appeared, offering Rion Opiate Sword Lethal, a beautiful longsword with a purple blade. She grabbed the handle, then was standing before Reinhart the next instant.

"Wha— Hold your horses! I surrender! Really! I mean it!"

"Hart-chan, if you really meant it, you'd stop releasing poison. The moment I got close, you actually started releasing even more of it. It's bothering Alex so

much that he's refusing to come out."

"Oh, I totally forgot! I'm sorry! You surprised me, so I was a little confused. Silly m—"

In a flash, Rion's sword had accurately pierced the gap between Reinhart's scales a total of five times to steal all his senses. He collapsed where he was, rendered incapable of even speaking, his flicking tongue being the only part of him still moving.

"Make them drop their guard. Give them hope. Then pull the carpet out from underneath them." Rion made a wry smile. "Leonhart-sama sure has a knack for coming up with ideas like this."

A soft croon sounded from within her shadow.



The Demon Lord Castle had been completely trashed. The sturdy walls were marred with countless holes and gashes, and the anti-air barrier that was supposed to withstand spells cast by an archwizard had collapsed. Every time a new shock wave ran through the compound, it caused so much shaking that one might think an earthquake had gone off. It was as if there were two massive monsters going on a rampage nearby.

Look at them go.

::Was this castle built to withstand earthquakes?::

After successfully infiltrating the city, Kelvin and Ange were now running through a garden within the castle compound. There were very few Cardinal Rages or obvious obstacles in sight.

Gerard's team is doing their job well, even considering they had to pivot and adapt. Thanks to them, we pretty much have free rein to go wherever we want.

::Ha ha, they couldn't be more attention-grabbing if they wanted to::

Team Gerard's efforts were one big reason why the Demon Lord Castle was practically undefended. Boga and Clotho had originally been instructed to blow a hole in the castle from the sky, but then the blue cocoon barrier had appeared and they'd had to focus on destroying that instead. These were extremely

dangerous tasks, as they involved charging straight into the enemy camp in order to provoke a response, but that was exactly why they had been assigned to the two with extremely large HP pools and high defense.

It was Gerard who had managed to get into the castle first. Kelvin had Summoned him inside Baal's wind barrier somewhere up in the sky. He had landed with a massive swing of his jet-black sword, decimating quite a few of their enemies with that dynamic entrance alone. After that, he had started rampaging inside the castle, roaring his challenge, "If anyone can defeat me, show yourself!" and creating as big a scene as he could. Thanks to Glory in Mine Hands, every golem he killed buffed his stats further, creating a momentum that enabled him to kill more and more golems in less and less time. He actually had the highest kill count in the party as of this moment thanks to this positive spiral.

Boga and Clotho were not just standing around idly either. After getting away from the two demon sisters, they returned to their original goal and descended on the castle to regroup with Gerard. All three of them, each of which was already highly conspicuous alone, joining together formed an absolute juggernaut that swept up the attention of all the enemy forces within the entire compound. As a result, Kelvin and Ange, who were going for a more covert approach, encountered no resistance at all.

Ugh, I messed up. I messed up big time.

::You look really disappointed, Kelvin-kun, but everything is going exactly according to our plan.::

If I don't find anyone to fight by the end of this, it's gonna be a loss in my view.

::As they say, the most delicious part always comes last. Trust my detection—Ah, there you go.::

The two stopped running. Right before them was a large demonic garden with a fountain spewing red water that looked like blood, and lush purple vegetation all around. Ten black golems stood at attention in the center, each holding a different weapon. They studied the two invaders as if sizing up prey.

Hmm, these are completely different models from the red ones out there. The only thing they share is the fog that blocks recognition. Zero effort was put into

making these look like Demon Lord Gustav.

::Their base stats are completely different too. I'm willing to bet Creator was involved.::

Ange's guess was on the money, of course. These black golems, called Schwarzstille, were prototypes of Jildora's efforts to upgrade the mass-produced Cardinal Rages. As these were no longer restricted by the need to resemble Gustav, they could be programmed with a much broader range of attack methods and weapon choices. They were so well-built that even Kelvin would struggle to make something of their equal at his current skill level.

Each one of these feels roughly as powerful as the blue golem that showed up in Trycen.

::Are you referring to Blue Rage? The golem that Creator was riding? Hmm...yep, judging by their presences, I agree with you.::

Oh goddess, the time for my salvation has come.

::So it seems. All right, leave these guys to me and go ahead, Kelvin-kun!::

Wait, why?! Kelvin's scream had come from the soul. Tears were starting to well up in his eyes.

::You must calm down, my rational Kelvin-kun. Do you still remember what we're here in Grebareika for?::

Sera's homecoming...and me giving my greetings.

::Correct. And are these golems the ones you're supposed to be greeting?::

N-No... It's supposed to be Gustav.

::Hey, so you do know the answer. I'm proud of you.::

Ugh... Having been backed into a corner by Ange's logic, Kelvin had no choice but to swallow his tears and go on ahead. His resolve had wavered a little but otherwise held firm. *Wait for me, Gustaaaaav!*

::That's the spirit!::

Kelvin cast Fly on himself and flew over the heads of the Schwarzstille. He braced himself in case they launched ranged attacks at him, but they simply let

him by. Not even one gave chase, making him click his tongue in frustration as he landed on the other side of the garden.

Dammit, they were apparently ordered to let me through. Ange! Try to capture these guys if you can! I imagine Shutola'll probably lose quite a few of her pawns in this fight, and these would be perfect as replacements!

::Ha ha, you give me such a tall order and then just leave? These golems are at least Rank S, and I'm facing ten of them at once. If you hold such high expectations for me...I just might get serious!::

Ange reached into her chest pocket and produced a fan of kunais in both hands. With a huge grin, she charged directly into the crowd of golems.



After leaving the capable-looking squad of golems to Ange, Kelvin proceeded deep into the Demon Lord Castle. This far in, there wasn't a single Cardinal Rage in sight, only the eeriness that one would expect of a place like this. Doing his best to suppress his mounting frustration about not having had a good fight this whole time, Grim Reaper continued pushing in farther and farther. Eventually, he came out into a different courtyard from before and found the encounter that he had been so desperate for.

"Hey there. Are you here to welcome me?" Kelvin asked. He was doing his best to maintain a cool tone but was actually so elated that he could practically jump for joy. The reason was that he was looking at someone with a humanoid appearance.

Kelvin's first impression was that this person looked quite smart and suave. He had black hair neatly slicked back and was wearing a butler uniform that looked brand new and was completely free of wrinkles. The lenses of his glasses reflected Kelvin's appearance when he pushed them up with one finger, making it seem like he was sizing up his sudden guest. The thing that got Kelvin the most excited was that this butler looked entirely human. Except for the horns and wings that identified him as a demon, that was.

"That is indeed the case, Kelvin-sama. My lord, Gustav-sama, awaits you. Would you please come with me?"

“Oh, will I. I couldn’t be happier to...is what I’d normally say. Uh, you know who I am?”

“I do indeed. Bell-sama informed Gustav-sama and me of your existence. Ah, I see I have forgotten to introduce myself. I am Sebasdel, the head of the Four Demonic Generals and the tutor in charge of education. It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Kelvin could not stop himself from pumping his fist. However, the butler did not even blink in response. This was one capable man.

“Now, will you come with me, please?”

“Oh, uh, of course. Please lead the way.”

Following in Sebasdel’s footsteps, Kelvin traced a path outside the main castle building and eventually arrived at a tower. He remembered seeing this tower from afar while on his reconnaissance date with Ange.

“This here is the Tower of Trials. I shall skip the details, but this is a place that my brethren and Gustav-sama came up with. You are to go through it.”

“No details, I see. So, is Gustav in here?”

“He is. He awaits you at the top floor. If there’s nothing else, I will now take my leave.”

“Wai—”

Before Kelvin could get another word in, Sebasdel seemingly disappeared. While suffering an attack of the unfortunate condition he possessed that brought a huge grin to his face, the Grim Reaper looked up at the challenge that loomed before him.

“Trial of Poison? Heh heh heh...” He read aloud the name on the plaque hanging from the top of the large entrance and walked through with a skip in his step, having already half forgotten his original goal for being there.



The first floor turned out to be far more spacious than the already impressive height of the tower indicated. When Kelvin opened the door, he found a swamp spread out before his eyes that reached quite far into the distance. There were

areas that could barely suffice as footholds here and there, but the overwhelming majority of the ground looked like a bottomless quagmire of pitch-black mud. The very act of breathing hurt, leading Kelvin to suspect that this place was quite similar to Boundless Poison in nature.

“But...there’s no one here.”

The setup here got Kelvin excited to see the other floors too, but only for a while. No matter how long he waited, the person who was supposed to deliver this trial never appeared. After using White Magic to cast Divine Dress on himself in preparation for dealing with poison, Kelvin was left just standing there. It wasn’t long before he started to get suspicious.

This is weird. This is the kind of situation where the boss makes a big, flashy entrance, right? I see the spiral staircase at the back, but, um, am I free to just take it? The large doors that lead to it were left wide open. Hold on, this is a trial prepared by Demon Lord Gustav, the man known to dote on his daughters to no end. It doesn’t make sense that I can stroll right through here. Did I fail to trigger what was supposed to happen by coming in wrong? The butler just now said that Gustav knows about me. In other words, he should be able to figure out why I’m seeking him out. I’m greeting him, yeah, but this is not just any greeting. This would be my first time seeing him, and if this was in Japan... Ohhhh, I think I get it. Is it that I need to make myself look more presentable and be more polite?

Kelvin ran through all the possibilities he could think of using Parallel Processing. The truth was that the boss of this trial, Reinhart of the Four Demonic Generals, had just been taken out by Rion somewhere else, but Kelvin did not know this. Just in case, he chose to reenter the room. He went out, closed the door, groomed himself, then knocked on the door like he was showing up for an interview and walked back in courteously.

“Excuse me! I’m Kelvin Celsius. Is anyone in?”

Naturally, no one responded. Kelvin continued waiting for a few more minutes.

::Kel-nii, just letting you know that I caught a big snake guy who called himself Reinhart and claimed to be one of the Four Demonic Generals. He apparently

used to be Kudo-chan's superior. I think this means there's a pretty big chance the other Demonic Generals also got revived. Also, I dunno if this counts as a war trophy, but I confiscated what seems like a sketchbook. I'm gonna leave it in Clotho's Storage for the time being, okay?::

I... I see. Good job, Rion. Continue doing your best out there. I'll leave you to make your own calls.

::Okay! Talk to you later!::

Finally, a telepathic message came from Rion that basically spoiled the mystery. Kelvin at least had the presence of mind to connect the dots and realize the issue wasn't his appearance or manners. Specifically, this was his chain of thought: Snake, who's one of the Four Demonic Generals → Demonic General is a poisonous snake → Master of using poison → Boss of the Trial of Poison → Currently in Rion's custody → No way to fight him!

"I...guess I'm off to the next trial, then."

Being able to change gears was a very important skill. This was but the prologue, the part before the actual story, and there were still other trials waiting. At least, that was what Kelvin muttered to himself under his breath as he crossed the poisonous swamp and climbed the stairs.

"Trial of Strength. Please tell me someone's here."

Kelvin read the plaque and pushed the heavy doors, which made way with a deep rumbling. The peek he got through the crack between the doors revealed a mountain area littered with loose rock and boulders. He also sensed the room being under the influence of a barrier that decreased the effectiveness of magic.

::Honey, wonderful news. Shutola and Colette have taken one of the enemy big shots, Vegalzeld of the Four Demonic Generals, hostage. He was a tough opponent who had superhuman strength and very effective healing abilities. Although he took out nearly all of Shutola's Guards, this was still a huge victory! He's knocked out right now with the whites of his eyes showing. We can heal him and start interrogating him anytime.::

Uh...tell them that they did good. We found replacements for the Guards she

lost. Ask Ange about them later.

::Understood. We'll be getting back to mopping up the remaining golems out here. Later.::

Once the telepathic conversation was over, Kelvin lifted his hand from the door and thought, Demonic General with healing and superhuman strength → Has a lot of strength → Boss of the Trial of Strength → Currently knocked out by Mel's group → No way to fight him!

"I knew it. I had a nagging feeling; I just knew it. Next floor! Next!"

Being able to change gears was a very important skill. Kelvin dashed through the mountainous area while trying his best to ignore it and shot up the stairs. Again, there was a plaque above the door.

"Trial of...Feeding? I've got a bad feeling about this..."

The word "feeding" particularly brought to mind Intemperate Feeding, the Unique Skill of Viktor, the demon who had been with Sera when Kelvin's group first found her and entrusted his parting wish to Kelvin when he died. Estoria might have revived the other Demonic Generals, but Viktor's death had been quite recent. It was a bit of a toss-up whether the Apostles had time to fetch his corpse from the Central Continent and revive it. This wasn't entirely out of the question, especially if former Guildmaster Rio actively cooperated, but it remained to be seen.

"C'mon! Are you serious?! I struck out three times in a row?!"

In the end, things were as Kelvin had feared. Whereas the previous two floors looked like outdoor spaces, this floor was practically an indoor kitchen, and a very well furnished one at that. However, unsurprisingly for a demon's room, there was a large pile of monster and human bones in a corner and large bubbling pots filled with an unknown liquid that brought witches to mind. There was also plenty of eerie ornamentation in the room, not least of which was a meat cleaver still stained red with blood stabbed into the countertop. Everything looked so realistic that Kelvin wondered if they had been left there on purpose for the sake of appearance.

"If I'm getting a free pass here too, that only leaves the butler from just now

and Gustav. Ugh, I don't feel like I was tested at all. Are you sure you're fine with this, fath—"

BOOM!

An incredible crash sounded from up above, shaking the entire tower.

"Apparently not." *The timing's hilarious, but I have a feeling the shaking just now was due to something else.* "Let's go see the butler, then. What a wonderful thing it is, knowing for sure that I'll have an oppo— Huh?"

In the middle of his grumbling, Kelvin noticed a small magic circle on the kitchen floor that was hidden underneath a few grotesque-looking ingredients. The closer he got, the brighter it shone.

"Is it a trap? Wait, whoa!"

The magic circle suddenly gave off a bright flash of light. However, that wasn't the only thing shining; the pair of gauntlets that Kelvin was wearing, Skill Eater, also began flashing in a peculiar way. Eventually, the light from the gauntlets gathered to form a crystal that flew into the magic circle. Thankfully, the gauntlets themselves remained on his hands, seemingly unaltered by the phenomenon that had just happened.

"What...is the meaning of this? I remember... No, more importantly, this place is..."

"Is this one of the clumsy nun's miracles? Did she set it up to go off after a certain period of time?"

"Wait, you..."

"It's been a while, Viktor."

The figure who emerged from the magic circle was Viktor, the archdemon member of the Four Demonic Generals whom Kelvin's party had once killed. He still had a barely shiny carapace, large mouth, and an appearance that looked like a cross between insect and human. When it came down to the details, however, a lot about him had changed. Most obviously, he now looked much more sinister and powerful than before. Perhaps throughout all the fighting that Kelvin had done so far, Experience Sharing had also been applied to his

gauntlets, indirectly affecting Viktor.

“Um...want me to catch you up to speed?”

“No, there is no need for that. The fact that I am here tells me what it is that I need to do. This was the weightiest order that Gustav-sama had ever given me. As ill luck would have it, it appears you’ve become someone important to Sera-sama.”

“You sure catch on quick. You fine with this?”

“There’s no problem. I can take my time figuring out the current situation later. Being able to change gears quickly is important, you know?” Viktor bared his vicious-looking teeth in a broad grin.



“How’re things? You found any interesting skills?”

“Oh, indeed. There’s so much here, I even picked up a new Unique Skill. Ha ha ha, this looks good too.”

One would have expected the battle junkie and demon to immediately break into a fight, but this was not what happened. Instead, Kelvin was currently sitting at a counter and eating a dish that Viktor had quickly whipped up for him. It was pretty delicious. The reason this had happened was that Viktor had actually evolved from archdemon to a tank demon and therefore needed time to spend all the SP that he had accrued. The rational battle junkie was fastidious in such matters—if he was going to fight someone, he wanted them at their best.

“Hey, this is meat and potato stew. Sera really likes this.”

“Meat and... That dish is called ‘curry.’”

“What?”

“Huh?”

There were times when the two found themselves not quite on the same page, but overall, the atmosphere between them was quite amicable. The biggest reason for this was that when Viktor asked bluntly, “Don’t you suspect me of putting poison in the food?” Kelvin had scoffed and replied, “A chef

worth his salt wouldn't do something like that" and then taken a big bite with zero hesitation. It was hard to read Viktor's emotions from his face, but Kelvin thought he sensed the demon turning a bit friendlier after that exchange.

"You sure about this, though? Your food is giving me buffs and everything."

"When a chef sees someone hungry, he serves them food. That's just how it is. In turn, you're giving me the opportunity to pick up new skills. Just consider us even. Aaaand...I am ready."

"Let's rumble." Kelvin shoveled the rest of the melt-in-your-mouth meat and potato stew into his mouth and tried to chew through everything in one go, but he couldn't quite pull off what Melfina and Mdofarak always made look so easy. As such, he was left just standing there chewing for quite a while. Eventually, he did manage to swallow it all.

Viktor chuckled a little. "Are you ready now?"

"Very." Kelvin was blushing slightly. *If Ange or Gerard were here, I'd never hear the end of it.*

Again, being able to quickly change gears was very important. The next instant, the slightly embarrassed expression on Kelvin's face gave way to one of maddened delight as his brain shifted into battle mode. Aside from a few trains of thought in Parallel Processing reserved for emergencies, Viktor now had Kelvin's undivided attention.

"Jin Scrimmage."

"Dual Obsidian Edge."

Black Magic permeated Viktor's black carapace and created for him massive arms just like what had happened in the Hidden Cavern of the Sage. At the same time, ten jet-black swords appeared in midair around Kelvin. All the points of these blades, which were as long as Kelvin's height, were pointed straight at Viktor, raring to whiz forward the moment Kelvin gave the order.

"Now, show me just how much you've grown!" Viktor's right arm abruptly extended and shot towards Kelvin, his claws drawing an arc through the air that was made all the more vicious by Jin Scrimmage.

“I return those words right back to you!” Two of the Obsidian Edges blasted forward as if propelled by the explosion of all of Kelvin’s pent-up expectations. Due to their toughness and the Ground Cleave spell that Kelvin had cast on them in passing, these two were the equal of a Rank S demon sword in both sharpness and destructive power.

Two dull, heavy clangs sounded out as the massive blades bounced off of the ironlike armor on the hand. The hand itself also had its trajectory redirected and ended up shooting off in a completely different direction. The blades were not chipped in the slightest, and the arm was unharmed. The first exchange had been a perfect tie.

“Boreas Death Scythe.”

“What?!”

By getting down as low to the ground as he could, Kelvin had managed to duck underneath the fully extended arm. He promptly swung his great scythe and chopped off the hand, armor and all, like it was nothing.

Right after sending out the two Obsidian Edges, Kelvin had cast Dual Sonic Acceleration on himself and charged in while hiding within their shadows. Whereas normal Sonic Acceleration doubled his Agility, Dual Sonic Acceleration tripled it. In exchange, its duration went down and it burned through MP like there was no tomorrow, but Kelvin had such a large pool that this was hardly an issue for him.

“It’s my first time seeing that one.” Not only was Viktor not grimacing in pain from losing his arm, he even had the composure to appreciate Kelvin’s attack.

“Spare me the talk. Those arms of yours are just projections, right?”

“Ha ha ha, that is correct.”

Thanks to his rather serious matches with Sera, Kelvin was very familiar with how Jin Scrimmage worked. The enlarged arms bore the characteristics of the user’s actual arms, but these were more like weapons made with magic. In Viktor’s case, it looked like he was stretching his arm whereas it was really only his armored carapace. As such, attacks that landed anywhere other than where the arm was connected with his shoulder actually did not hurt him at all.

“You got it right, but that’s no reason to stop paying attention to the ground.”

Viktor’s other arm burst out from the kitchen floor near Kelvin’s foot. The battle junkie instantly deployed Helix Barrier, but Viktor spread his fingers and grabbed the barrier of razor-sharp wind and clenched it so hard it began deforming.

“Take this as thanks for showing me something interesting. Now it’s my turn to show you something you’ve never seen before.”

“Maybe I have, maybe I haven’t. Let’s see it.”

Viktor already had a firm grip on Helix Barrier as a whole through the hand protruding from the ground, but he was not done. The arm that Kelvin had just chopped off turned into a black ball of extremely concentrated magic floating in midair.

“Dead End Crush.”

As soon as the ball neared Kelvin, it exploded with rays too black to be described as light. The entire area, including Viktor’s other arm, was reduced to ashes.

“Oh, sorry. I’ve seen that one before. One of my disciples used it.”

“Ah, that’s a pity.”

Kelvin, of course, got out unscathed. A single downward swing of his Grim Reaper scythe had completely bisected both the explosion and Viktor’s arm. Also, because he had once seen Miyabi, one of the Heroes, use this move against Rion, he knew what countermeasures to take. He was so on top of the situation that he was able to send his remaining eight Obsidian Edges flying towards Viktor, purposely taking advantage of this moment when the demon had lost both arms.

Sonic Acceleration was going to run out soon. Kelvin charged straight at Viktor while muttering, “Efficiency!” to himself under his breath. Unfortunately, he found his path blocked by a swarm of skulls of varying shapes and sizes. Some of them even had knives similar to what was available in the kitchen.

Ah, he must have cast Hades’s Army on the mountain of bones at the side of

the room. Okay, using pot lids as shields is a bit much, isn't it? The composition of this whole scene is just...

The bones' equipment was also quite varied. Their looks aside, the bones in this room had come from Abyssland creatures, so they were turning out to be surprisingly powerful. That said, they still could not last more than a few seconds against Kelvin, but that was enough time for Viktor to scour the room.

"I couldn't be happier. Everything here's exactly how I left it, from the tools to even the ingredients. I suspect this was Sebasdel's handiwork?"

"You talking about that butler? I met him"—Kelvin unleashed a swing with his scythe—"before I entered this tower."

"Ha ha ha, is that so?"

Viktor leaped up to perch on top of a birdcage hanging from the ceiling and jabbed his hand inside to take out a small lizard. The creature was only big enough to match the palm of his hand and didn't look particularly different from any common lizard. However, its cry seemed mixed with the death cries of a large number of other monsters.

"This lizard is called a little flogazard. Don't be deceived by how small it is; it is capable of spewing flames as powerful as a dragon's. It doesn't have much meat, but the little it does have is absolutely delicious. I cannot serve it to Sera-sama, but this is one dish that I highly recommend."

Viktor opened his mouth wide and swallowed this highly recommended ingredient whole. "Mmmmm! It is just as delicious as I recall. The best way to enjoy this is with the throat. It's so hot that it just might burn me." He lifted the corners of his mouth in a satisfied smile that looked like a sneer.

Eating an ingredient while it was still alive was an extremely rare practice here in this world. Even in Toraj, a country largely influenced by Japanese culture, only a very select few were particular to this method of eating, and they only did so with a limited variety of seafood. Any normal person who tried to eat a little flogazard alive would be burned from the inside out; in fact, the tiny creature probably wouldn't even pass their throat. The only individual who just might be able to pull it off was a certain goddess.

::Achoo.::

Kelvin thought he received a telepathic message but figured he must have imagined it. Either way, he was in the middle of a fight right now and did not have the mental resources to react to it. Instead, he finished off the last skull that was coming at him and looked up at Viktor, propping his scythe on his shoulder. “You sure are composed, grabbing a snack in the middle of a fight.”

“Ha ha ha, for me, eating is a valid fighting strategy. All the more so as it seems that I’ve lost all the skills I had saved inside my stomach due to dying.”

“Oh right, your Unique Skill was Intemperate Feeding. That’s a hard one to use all right.”

“I cannot agree more. I’m going to have to eat everything all over again.”

Intemperate Feeding was a skill that made it so that Viktor could gain an imitation of the skills possessed by those he ate. The more emotionally attached he and his target were, the closer his copied version of their skills would be to their original levels. These skills were then added to his Status as buffs, but dying had apparently rid him of all those buffs. Of course, Viktor had been able to make Kelvin food just now because he had picked up the Cooking skill and raised it to Rank S first thing.

“If I remember correctly, your skill only really works when your target is close to you, right? Wouldn’t you eating that lizard drop the rank of the skill you get all the way to the bottom?”

“Oh, but we *are* close. I, as a chef, deeply love all the ingredients I use.”

Viktor inclined his head quizzically, indicating that he failed to see the issue here. As it turned out, Intemperate Feeding worked even when Viktor was the only one holding feelings for his target. As long as he truly felt something from the bottom of his heart, even if they were monsters, those that he consumed would give him all their skills without being nerfed.

“As such, please do not waste your energy worrying about me!” The demon yanked the steel cage out of the ceiling and threw it at Kelvin.

The Grim Reaper easily cut it in half with his scythe but found Viktor coming in right behind with the speed of a bullet. His stretched-out hands trailed behind

him, their excessive length indicating that he had launched himself using their elasticity.

Knowing that he still had a significant advantage in Agility, Kelvin chose not to defend or back up but to rush forward to meet the attack. He swung Boreas Death Scythe, the scythe of a Grim Reaper, directly at Viktor's face with unbelievable speed. With no hesitation and no mercy, the wicked crescent blade passed through the demon.

"Huh?!"

"Ufh... And now it's mine."

Viktor smirked with blood trickling down his cheeks. His head, which was supposed to be chopped in half, was still whole. And yet Boreas Death Scythe had indeed passed by him. What had actually happened was that the moment the blade had entered his astonishingly huge mouth, it had disappeared. All that was left was Black Staff of Disaster without its blade. Kelvin tried to recast the spell, but for some reason, the magic wouldn't form.



Did he eat my magic? Is this the effect of a skill? Is he interfering with my chanting? Dozens of possibilities raced through Kelvin's mind in a split second, but he couldn't find a single one that fully matched what he saw. The only thing he knew for sure was that Viktor had eaten Boreas Death Scythe and was still alive.

"Hmph!"

There was no time for Kelvin to stand there analyzing things, though. Viktor was closing the distance once again, spewing flames from his mouth with a loud, "*Fwoooooo!*"

That's from the lizard just now!

Heat just as hot as an adult flame dragon's Fire Breath filled Kelvin's entire field of view. Helix Barrier could fend off something of this level without problems, but Kelvin stayed focused and didn't let his guard down. He knew full well that these flames were only a smoke screen.

A fist...then his whole body!

Viktor's right fist burst through the flames, revealing itself once again clad in Jin Scrimmage. Casting this spell only on a specific body part to save time was a tactic that Sera often used. Considering Viktor was the person who had taught her how to fight, it was not surprising at all for him to come up with the same idea on the spot. Rather, as he had so much more fighting experience than her, it seemed like he was pulling it off even more masterfully.

With the added momentum of a proper approach run, Viktor's arm managed to pierce Helix Barrier. After having thrown Disaster back into Storage, Kelvin drew the two Obsidian Edges that he had launched at the start of the fight back to his hands and used Sword Mastery and Dual Wield to parry the incoming attack. The shock upon contact was so heavy that he felt it in the bones of his arms, but all this did was stoke his glee and feed his craving. This wasn't enough! He couldn't hold himself back anymore!

"Judging by that smile, you're still very much a battle junkie!"

"And I have you to thank for helping me realize that about myself!"

Of course, the fight did not slow for even a beat after Kelvin deflected Viktor's fist. The greatswords were swung all the way and the fist was flying off somewhere else when the demon's full body came in hard, partly pulled by the extended fist shrinking like rubber. Kelvin attempted to intercept him with the remaining eight Obsidian Edges in the air, but Viktor swatted away six of them with his left hand and the remaining two did nothing against his ironlike armor. Immediately after this, the two crashed into each other, kicking off a seemingly endless exchange between fist and greatsword, black versus black. Each time they clashed, a shock wave blasted throughout the kitchen, filling the air with the piercing sound of metal on metal.

As Sonic Acceleration was still in effect, Kelvin was launching more attacks than Viktor was. Viktor was responding with his enlarged right arm and unenchanted but still extremely tough left arm, but Kelvin's Obsidian Edges were slipping through his guard and repeatedly slashing at the gaps in between the armored parts on his torso. Unfortunately, these attacks were dealing pretty much no damage whatsoever.

Damn, not a single one of those attacks has hurt him. That must mean he's even tougher than Gerard. Honestly, this is a bit hard to handle without Boreas Death Scythe, which allows me to cut through anything. Worst of all, I seem to be struggling to use magic in general. I bet it's 'cus of something he's got set up.

As Kelvin continued trying out everything in his arsenal, Viktor grew increasingly surprised as the fight went on. He had tried multiple times to land a hit with the weakening debuff that he had cast on his fist, but each time, Kelvin managed to either dispel it with White Magic with pinpoint accuracy or sword strikes that seemed way too fast considering the size of the blades he was wielding. As a result, Kelvin had yet to take a single hit. Viktor's memory of Kelvin was that of a Summoner who specialized in using magic; even if he somehow managed to master a finicky midrange weapon like the scythe, him becoming such a formidable close-quarters fighter was entirely unimaginable.

Ugh...is he really a Summoner? How is he able to wield two greatswords like it's nothing? He's practically dual wielding like a Hero! Of course, Serge was far more formidable, but even so, I am astonished.

In addition to having Sword Mastery at Rank S, Kelvin had actually also

borrowed Rank S Dual Wielding from Rion. This was a skill that only a Hero was supposed to possess, but Skill Eater had the ability to make the impossible possible. In a way, this was thanks to Viktor, whose carapace had been the main material for the gauntlets.

I see, he's worked so hard to train himself because of how serious he is about having a relationship with Sera-sama. Ha ha ha, the resentment that I felt earlier has thinned just a little. Not that I'll go any easier on him, of course.

Viktor had no idea how close yet how far his inference was. The reason Kelvin had developed his close-quarters combat prowess was purely because it was his hobby, but it was true that he did also need those skills to handle Sera when she was dead drunk. Otherwise, he would be dead before he had the chance to take the relationship any further.

"Ha ha ha, I hope you don't die from this."

Viktor finally managed to grab one of Kelvin's greatswords with his enlarged hand. He opened his mouth wide and activated the new Unique Skill he had just acquired, Devour. An invisible mass of magic gathered deep within his throat to form a certain something that then shot out in a fraction of a second. Kelvin noticed it at the last possible moment. Viktor had the superior Strength, meaning it was impossible for Kelvin to wrestle back the sword that the demon now had an iron grip on. Immediately, he let go of the handle and raised his other sword to block what was coming.

Shhhp.

Something slid right into Obsidian Edge, a blade tough enough to endure multiple blows from Viktor's enlarged hand, and bisected it without Kelvin feeling even an ounce of resistance. The attack was invisible, but Kelvin knew what it was. In fact, he was the most familiar with it in the world.

That's a Boreas Death Scythe blade!

The blade of the Grim Reaper that had disappeared from Black Staff of Disaster was back before his eyes. There was no time to consider the "why" and the "how." Kelvin knew that if what was coming at him had the same properties as Boreas Death Scythe, then all attempts to block it were meaningless.

“Hng...augh!”

Kelvin dodged the blade by a hair...or not. As a result, he suffered a deep cut that ran from his left cheek to his ear. Blood spurted out, staining his black clothes.

I shot that attack at him pretty fast by even adding my own MP, and yet he still managed to avoid it glancing his vitals in spite of his posture and how close he was at the time. And he's still grinning. Viktor was impressed yet again, though he didn't let it show. *That aside...it was my first time using Devour just now, and it went pretty well. I was worried whether I'd be able to activate it, but it turns out those worries were for naught. I've chosen a very useful power.*

The two combatants' eyes met as broad smiles adorned both their faces.

“Ha ha...ha ha ha! This is so fun, isn't it?!”

“Please don't ask me to endorse your peculiar values. It's quite troubling.”

The reason each person was smiling couldn't have been more different.

After having lost two swords, Kelvin still had eight. The moment these eight were deflected, they had circled back around to encircle Viktor from all directions. Now they shot towards the demon, every last one enchanted with Vortex Edge.

“It won't work.”

With the casual nature of eating a lollipop, Viktor brought the greatsword in his hand to his mouth. Even though it had changed hands, its toughness remained the same. However, the magic that had created it was dispelled the moment the blade entered the demon's mouth. At the same time, the eight Obsidian Edges that were about to make a pincushion out of him crumbled into dirt that fell harmlessly to the ground. Due to having lost what they were attached to, the casts of Vortex Edge also fizzled out in turn. Similarly, the remaining half of the greatsword in Kelvin's hand also turned to dirt, such that it seemed about to fall apart with the slightest touch.

In exchange, Viktor reached into his mouth and pulled something out. “And what do we have here? This is a better knife than I expected. You have my gratitude.” He was now holding a blade that, at first glance, looked like a

kitchen knife. However, its length was equal to the greatswords that Kelvin had been manipulating mere moments ago, meaning that what Viktor had was more similar to a horse-slaying sword.

Ahhh, I think I sorta get what his ability does.

All of Kelvin's attempts to create Obsidian Edges were now misfiring, just like what had happened when he was trying to cast Boreas Death Scythe earlier. He looked up from his dirt-covered hand to the demon and racked his brains to deduce the effects and limitations of Devour.

The decision to throw all the Obsidian Edges at Viktor had actually been an experiment. Just as Intemperate Feeding could only be used on living beings, Devour could only be used on magic. Any spell that entered his mouth, no matter its properties and toughness, would instantly be rendered useless and be broken down into components that then entered Viktor's stomach. Once that happened, he would be able to use that spell, whereas the original caster no longer could.

And that's what I've worked out so far. The issue is how long it lasts and how many spells he can keep in stock. I highly doubt it's limitless. In that case...

Kelvin hummed cheerfully to himself as he crushed the dirt sword handle in his hand and let the pieces fall to the ground. "Isn't that a bit too big to be called a knife? You picked up Sword Mastery, Viktor?"

"Ha ha ha, you jest. I am a chef. I have no problem wielding them as an application of my Cooking skill."

That means you're thinking of cooking me into a dish, right? One of Kelvin's trains of thought under Parallel Processing arrived at a pretty alarming conclusion. Considering who he was facing, however, he realized chances were high this was actually what was happening and that Viktor did intend on eating him in the literal sense. *He's the kinda guy who keeps his word and immediately does what he says he'll do, after all.*

"If the chitchat is over, I would now like to try using these."

The sight of Viktor charging at him with an Obsidian Edge held up menacingly prompted Kelvin to reach into his sleeve and pull out his next weapon.

Since Viktor's a guy, yep, I can use this.

Out came Mad Holy Sword Clive, the abominable yet gorgeous blade that Kelvin had sworn to never use against women.

Clang!

Viktor proved that he could indeed wield his massive knife through the Cooking skill. He brandished it furiously and with skillful deftness, though it wasn't clear whether he was thinking of filleting Kelvin or chopping him up into large cubes of meat. With terrible timing, this was the exact moment Sonic Acceleration ran out, leaving Kelvin struggling to keep up. He was at an extreme disadvantage as Viktor wouldn't take damage even if an attack was to land on him, while Kelvin would be out of the fight if anything even grazed him.

"Triple Air Pressure."

"Ugh!"

While he was recasting Sonic Acceleration, Kelvin also unleashed Air Pressure to crush everything in the room. At Triple, the pressure was not only flattening all the tools and ingredients in the room but even making the entire tower groan in protest. Indeed, the first floor, the Trial of Poison, was actually beginning to sink into the ground. And yet the structure refused to collapse, which spoke volumes about the quality of the work done by those who had erected it.

Even though Air Pressure hadn't worked on Viktor during Kelvin's first fight with him, Triple Air Pressure was now definitely powerful enough to obstruct his movement.

"How...ever!" The demon turned his mouth skyward and opened it wide. That instant, the overwhelming pressure disappeared.

"So this kind of spell doesn't work either."

"It is all the same. Now, a taste of your own medicine." Viktor opened his mouth in Kelvin's direction and spat out the spell he had just Devoured. Immediately, the battle junkie was assaulted by enough weight to crush him to death...

“Hm?”

Or not. Viktor seemed at a loss as to why his skill wasn't working.

Yep, he doesn't have it.

Being able to effectively steal someone else's magic was an astounding ability. However, once Kelvin figured it out fully, he realized there were ways to deal with it. He had already come up with one when Viktor had Devoured Air Pressure.

First, there was a limit to the number of spells that Viktor could keep in stock. The instant he put Air Pressure in his mouth, the knife in his hand had turned to dirt. In other words, he could only hold one spell at a time. Kelvin had succeeded in creating an Obsidian Edge the size of a letter opener, proving that he was getting back the spells that Viktor let go of. He strongly suspected he could recast Boreas Death Scythe if he wanted to.

After figuring this out, Kelvin decided to attempt overwriting the spell that Viktor was holding on to. If Viktor was absorbing spells that went into his mouth, then it was simply a matter of purposely putting a harmless spell in there. So thinking, the moment the demon opened his mouth to unleash Air Pressure, Kelvin had cast Clean on him. Clean was a spell completely unrelated to combat that cleaned and freshened up its target. After Clean became Viktor's registered spell, all his attempts to use it did nothing aside from cleaning his surroundings. Rather than being crushed, everything turned sparkling clean instead.

Viktor got suspicious upon seeing Kelvin's grin, which prompted him to smash the kitchen floor and dive into the ground.

This only made Kelvin's smile grow even wider. “You didn't think that one through, did you?” He placed a hand on the ground and murmured, “Triple Ground Cleave.”

The ground began undulating violently as if it were a living thing. Soon, large cracks appeared. A large part of the ground abruptly rose up as another part plunged, practically spitting Viktor back out. It was an absolute mystery how there was ground here inside the tower. The people who made this place really must have been absolute masters of their craft after all.

“What on—”

“Triple Glory Sanctuary.”

The moment Viktor was spat back out into the air, he was immediately transfixed by three floating rings. One was squeezing his head tightly, muffling his large mouth. At the same time, this spell also buffed Kelvin’s Strength and MP.

“You’ve gotta think of ways to prevent unwanted spells from entering your mouth. For example, something like what I just used, Ground Cleave, would be great, as it deals all its damage in a burst and therefore you only need to open your mouth for a small amount of time. Also, Viktor? Make sure you familiarize yourself with how to use that new Unique Skill of yours before you fight again. If you’re eating literally everything that enters your mouth, well, the term ‘intemperate feeding’ might be more appropriate here.”

Kelvin held Clive at the ready and said to the sword, “We’re going all in. This is your moment to shine. Triple Ground Cleave. Triple Vortex Edge.” He enchanted it with spell after spell until it was clad in a furious whirlwind of magic. Then he lifted it and, with a hearty battle cry, brought it down on Viktor, smashing his armor and shattering the Jin Scrimmage part of his right arm.



“Wh-Where am I?” Viktor groaned as he opened his eyes after a nap that felt longer than it probably had been. Realizing that he was lying on the floor of the kitchen, he sat up to the protest of his entire body and looked around. The room that should have been trashed had been restored to its original state.

“Hey there. You’re finally awake.”

The demon turned towards the direction of the voice. There, Kelvin was sitting sprawled out on a very comfortable-looking sofa. The room itself had been restored, but the tables and chairs that had been crushed to smithereens due to Air Pressure were beyond repair. This sofa had to be something he had brought in himself.

“You... I see. I lost.”

“Mainly because you hadn’t gotten used to your Evolved self yet, feels like.

Well, it still was a great fight. You even made me crack out my Triples, and lemme tell you, spamming those isn't easy, even for me."

"Ha ha ha, so you say, but you haven't even broken a sweat. You still have cards up your sleeve, don't you?"

"Who knows? If you're curious, wanna go for another round? I'd be totally up for it. Let's do it!" Kelvin declared, giving Viktor an open invitation to another fight with a huge grin on his face. He even doubled down on it because of how important it was to him. "You've gotten quite used to your new Unique Skill by now, right? I'm sure it'd be a lot more fun this time!"

"I'll have to refrain. There are still other trials that await you, and I am a little tired now."

"Do you still hurt anywhere? For what it's worth, I think I've healed all the wounds that you suffered from our fight. Or are you still cursed by Clive? Looks like it got a bit too gung ho about the opportunity to taste flesh again after so long. I took my time dispelling everything though, so I doubt there are any lingering effects."

Viktor watched as the battle junkie drew Mad Holy Sword Clive from its scabbard and stared into the blade that seemed to be glowing a little bit brighter than before. *So he's already used White Magic to treat all my injuries. Um, did I imagine it, or did he just mention a bunch of really worrying terms like "curse," "lingering effects," and "tasting flesh"? That's supposed to be a holy sword, right?*

All things aside, Viktor was actually in tip-top condition at the moment. The wounds on his face were gone, and there were no traces left of the fatal blow he had taken, which had ended the fight. He checked his Status and found it completely devoid of all mention of curses.

"Well...I'm not quite sure what you were referring to at the end, but I feel absolutely fine at the moment. I'm exhausted; that is all. This is a rather pleasant sensation, actually. I feel refreshed from the very bottom of my heart."

"I see. That's too bad."

"I believe most people would reply with something more along the lines of,

‘I’m glad to hear it.’”

“Hm? Oh, I suppose you’re right. But sadly, I’m not ‘most people.’”

“You truly haven’t changed. That’s actually really impressive.”

The way Kelvin hung his head did seem like a bit of an overreaction. However, the fact that this was half an act or a joke meant, to Viktor’s consternation, that there was a whole other half that was actually serious.

“Now, this is it for my trial. If you make Gustav-sama wait too long, he will be angry with you. I strongly recommend that you proceed to the next one without ado.”

“Don’t worry, I was just about to go.” Kelvin stood up and held out his hand towards the sofa. “Clotho.” After the sofa seemingly disappeared into the sleeve of his robe, he started walking towards the staircase leading up.

“Oh, hey, Viktor?” Kelvin had taken two or three steps up when he suddenly paused as if something had occurred to him and turned only his face back. “After that fight, Sera resented you so much she cried out loud. So, don’t die again. Else she’ll cry again.”

“I will take that to heart.”

Having said all that he wanted to say, Kelvin finally left the room of the Trial of Feeding behind. The demon remained, continuing to stare at the ceiling for quite a while afterwards.



Kelvin paused to read the plaque that said “Trial of the Garden” before stepping through a pair of double doors that opened up to a garden of blooming red roses. The place where he had encountered the Schwarzstille had been a garden too, but this one was remarkably more beautiful for all the vivid color that it was filled with. The sight was enough to give anyone pause. There was an expansive blue sky up above that, if not for the staircase at the back of the room, could very easily trick visitors into thinking that this was the top floor of the tower.

“And of course, my next opponent is you.”

“It is indeed. Before anything else, allow me to give you a round of applause. Well done coming this far.”

The person currently clapping to indicate his appreciation was, of course, the demon with glasses and a butler uniform: Sebasdel, head of the royal tutors and the Four Demonic Generals. The reflection from his glasses made it hard to look into his eyes, but his back was straight as a rod and his manner was welcoming.

“I don’t feel like I deserve that praise, though. The Trials of Poison and Strength were unmanned, so I only got to fight Viktor.”

“There is no need to be humble, Kelvin-sama. Reinhart and Vegalzeld of the first two floors were absent because they were defeated by your companions. Divide and conquer, yes? Your exemplary teamwork with your party members is what enabled you to challenge the Tower of Trials at half strength. There just might be a general in you.”

“I, uh...thank you.”

Needless to say, Kelvin had not put as much thought into everything as Sebasdel was giving him credit for. Rather, he was actually regretting how well things had gone.

“So, Viktor is back, is he? He was the only one that Bell-sama could not find. Turns out he was aboveground all this time.”

“I heard he went aboveground in search of Sera.”

“So that’s why. That makes sense, as he was Sera-sama’s personal attendant.” The butler pushed up his glasses with an index finger. “Allow me to introduce myself once again. My name is Sebasdel. On top of my main duty of teaching the young ladies etiquette, I served as Bell-sama’s personal butler. Additionally, just like Viktor was Sera-sama’s combat instructor, I was Bell-sama’s teacher, though fighting with fists versus legs are very different styles, of course.”

“Very true.” Kelvin nodded.

“Unfortunately, the paths of some martial instructors are more treacherous than others. While it did not take long for Viktor to be assigned to Sera-sama exclusively thanks to his inhuman appearance, it was an enormous struggle for me. Gustav-sama was extremely harsh on me, claiming that it was because I

had a nice face and it pissed him off. At the start, I was forbidden from even being in the same room as Bell-sama and had to convey all my instructions through maids under my command. Only after several years was I allowed to be within ten meters of the room, and it was another several years before I could instruct her directly. Even then, Gustav-sama cracked my glasses at least three times a day.”

“I...see?” The conversation seemed to be getting derailed, but Kelvin still nodded.

“Of course, I was not allowed to touch her on pain of death. There were many moments when I almost lost heart, but I managed to impart countless techniques to Bell-sama in spite of the circumstances. I was only able to continue as butler thanks to her regard for me. Bell-sama might come across as cold in comparison to Sera-sama, but she is actually very kind at heart. It might be forbidden for me, her butler, to feel this way, but there are many moments when I think of her as my own daughter, and it’s just...”

“Good for... I... Sure.” Kelvin managed to nod once more, despite his confusion at the sudden confession.

“That’s why...that’s precisely why...I can never forgive you for laying your dirty hands on Bell-sama. She told Gustav-sama and me that you stole something precious of hers. All debauchers deserve nothing short of death!”

“Hold on, that doesn’t sound right!” Kelvin protested loudly, no longer nodding.

The flames of fury lit up in Sebasdel’s eyes. “I see. So you intend to play innocent to the very end. Are you making me say the words, Lord Lecher?”

“I’m not playing innocent; I didn’t do anything! And can you not call me names like that?!”

“Hm, I suppose speaking with our fists isn’t that bad a recourse every once in a while. I shall take a page from Gustav-sama’s book.”

Kelvin threw up both hands. “He’s not listening.”

As it turned out, this demon was also doting and overprotective. Now, he was radiating pure hostility and getting increasingly caustic with the way he was

referring to Kelvin.

Looks like nothing I say will get through to him anymore. In all likelihood, Gustav, who's probably waiting above, will be the same. Wait, hold on. Although I am being wrongfully accused, if I admit to what they're accusing me of, wouldn't that make them want to kill me for real? As they say, in for a penny, in for a pound.

As someone constantly seeking the ultimate battle, Kelvin realized these developments were actually very ideal. His only concern was the battle that would ensue should Sera and Ange get wind of this mistaken information. That in itself sounded like it would be a great time, but he didn't want the girls to hate him.

"Well, I did have a bit of 'fun' with her. Or did I? Either way, Bell was the one who assaulted me first." The conclusion that Kelvin reached after using Parallel Processing in full was to give a vague answer that could be both interpreted badly or used as insurance when things went south.

"I see. So you have admitted to it. Those shall be your last words, womanizer."

"As I said, that's a misun—" Kelvin was interrupted as he suddenly lost the ability to breathe and tasted blood in his mouth. He looked down and realized that Sebasdel's knee was buried deep in his abdomen. "Ugh!"

"I don't need you to say anything else. I already have your last words."

The battle junkie marveled at the sound of his own bones breaking as he was blasted to the opposite end of the room. He slammed into the beautifully cultivated roses, parting them with a headwind generated with Green Magic while using White Magic with his other hand to heal the wound.

I couldn't sense his approach. When did he even start kicking? Is he just really fast like Ange is? No, that doesn't seem right.

Kelvin got his thoughts together in the brief amount of time he had before landing. To be exact, he *had* to get his thoughts together by then. Otherwise, he just might fall victim to the same incomprehensible attack again.

BZZZZZZ!

When Kelvin looked up, Sebasdel was already right before his eyes. The demon unleashed a back kick that would have caught him squarely on the chin if not for the barrier that he deployed in the nick of time. The metallic sound of razor-sharp blades of wind grinding against the heels of Sebasdel's shoes created a piercing metallic buzz.

Special shoes, I see. The blades of wind are raising sparks when hitting them.

At first glance, the demon's shoes looked like normal leather shoes, but Kelvin could see from behind his barrier that the outsole was coated with metal. This meant Sebasdel could use his shoes as weapons too, just like how Ange hid knives in hers to do the same.

"This is a nice, brisk wind. However..."

Sebasdel backed off from the barrier, but Kelvin gave chase as if trying to crush the demon to death. With Sonic Acceleration active, Kelvin had the upper hand when it came to Agility, which allowed him to rapidly close the distance.

"It seems repulsive somehow." Sebasdel snapped his fingers. Suddenly, he was in a completely different location.

The sense of wrongness pricked at Kelvin again. "So that's what it was." *This isn't instant teleportation. It's hard to tell because of all the roses here, but I'm the one who moved. If so...* He was having the time of his life; the process of piecing together fragments of information to form a hypothesis about the opponent's abilities was something that he absolutely loved about fighting new people.

In an attempt to shake Sebasdel up, Kelvin asked, "You have a skill that lets you control space? That's one hell of a convenient ability."

"I am not in any way obliged to reply to a filthy philanderer."

"Uh..." *Seriously, how many names are you gonna call me? It's definitely your fault that Bell has a foul mouth, right? Though I do concede that the guy who developed Helix Barrier was an absolute piece of shit, so that's fine. Ah, now I feel the urge to try using Mad Holy Sword Clive on him.*

"Goodness me, it appears that I have no hope of breaking through that repulsive barrier of yours at this rate. Why didn't you vomit out all your organs

with the first attack and just die on the spot?”

“C’mon, be reasonable. In the first place, how can a butler speak like that? What if it rubs off on your charge?”

“There is a demand for such things in this world. Though, of course, a lust demon like you is not even worthy of Bell-sama’s insults. You would think it a reward, wouldn’t you?”

That sounds like something that you’re into! Why did Gustav leave this butler alive? Look at him; he didn’t bat an eye after saying that line! This is a dangerous person if I’ve seen one. Given how much of a doting parent Gustav is, how can he overlook this? He’s clearly a terrible role model, yet not only was he tasked with teaching etiquette, he was even appointed leader of the Four Demonic Generals. Uh...Gustav doesn’t have the same preferences as him, right?

Kelvin was getting a bit worried. For now, however, he lifted a brief prayer of thanks for Sera having grown up right.

“Getting that look from Bell-sama would be one thing, but I don’t need it from a sicko like you. Now, that is enough talking about Bell-sama, sweet and wonderful though she is. Jin Scrimmage!”

Black magic roared into existence and was sucked towards Sebasdel’s legs to form enlarged limbs the way it had Viktor’s arms. Kelvin had half expected this to happen the moment he’d heard that Sebasdel had served as Bell’s martial arts teacher, so this sight did not surprise him. On the contrary, he had been eagerly awaiting this moment.

Sebasdel wasn’t done yet. Right after he murmured, “Vortex Greaves,” a sharp wind sprang up, kicking up rose petals as it clad his greaves.

Kelvin found himself naturally baring his teeth. “Of course you would know Green Magic. Why wouldn’t you? You’re Bell’s teacher, after all. You’ve got a good wind going yourself.”

“There is nothing for you to be delighted about. My feet have turned into spears that repulsive barrier of yours has no hope of stopping. Death is right on your doorstep as of this moment.”

The battle junkie did not reply. After the two stared at each other for a few moments, Sebasdel's figure disappeared and reappeared right in front of Kelvin, his kick already halfway through tearing a massive gash in Helix Barrier.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you something." Kelvin casually grabbed Sebasdel's foot, ignoring the shower of sparks that burst out. "I'm quite used to this happening. When an opponent breaks through Helix Barrier, that's when the fight really starts."

Kelvin was wearing Skill Eater. This pair of gauntlets had been made from Viktor's carapace, meaning that, though not quite the equal of Sera's Arondight, they were actually quite tough. What's more, Kelvin had cast a concentrated version of Vortex Armor on them, the same spell that he had used on Boga earlier.

Without ado, Kelvin clenched his fist, shattering Sebasdel's leg. The demon got away using his ability, but the battle turned quite one-sided after that. Kelvin insisted on fighting in close quarters, instantly locating and closing in on Sebasdel no matter where the demon teleported to. He was still quite an amateur compared to Sera, the one who had taught him how to fight, and his Status was clearly not suitable for close-quarters combat. However, the many buffs he cast on himself and the adrenaline rush from landing hit after hit enabled him to begin overwhelming the demon.

"There."

"Again?!"

Once again, Sebasdel teleported, but Kelvin was already halfway to closing the distance by the time he reappeared. Currently, Kelvin was so sensitive to presences and to the flow of magic that, for the moment, he was almost as good as Sera and Ange. There was no escape for the demon; the Grim Reaper was always there, breathing down his neck.

Sebasdel picked up the rubble around the wrecked room with the violently whipping gales under his control and threw them at Kelvin at high speed. They posed a definite threat, especially because Sebasdel was using teleportation to complicate their trajectories. In addition, the demon himself was constantly trying to attack Kelvin from his blind spots, both by teleporting and zipping

about with his wings, even going the extra mile by using feints. The nonstop barrage of pincer attacks proved too much for Kelvin to handle and he ended up taking a few.

Sebasdel rushed in with another kick, but Kelvin deflected it. The problem for the demon was that although some of his attacks were landing, they weren't doing any lasting damage. Even his critical hits were failing to make any difference.

"You have a really fun fighting style! But unfortunately, even with your teleporting, you're slower than Ange and your attacks are weaker than Sera's!"

The wind that Kelvin had clad around his arms was now flowing all around his body like blood, having turned into both a spearhead of whatever form he wanted and a shield of the strongest iron. It gathered exactly where he told it to, forming something much more effective than Helix Barrier, which was making it impossible for Sebasdel to deal any damage even with the attacks that he was landing. To make matters worse, the speed of Kelvin's reflexes was improving so fast that he was starting to parry what he couldn't before. As a sign of this, the demon's leg was being smashed with increasing frequency, leaving it very battered.

"Caught you."

Kelvin's transformation was over much sooner than Sebasdel had expected. The demon had just reappeared from a teleport and was unleashing a roundhouse kick when Kelvin, after sweeping away a boulder flying his way, caught his leg and held it in a viselike grip. Then he found himself slammed against the ground face-first as wind howled in his ears. It was only at this moment that Sebasdel realized the floor had been coated with a black material that made it extremely tough.

"Oof!"

The demon's glasses shattered and blood spurted from his mouth as the magic around his legs dissipated with the shock of the impact. He had reverted to his original appearance.

"Ha ha... Ha ha ha... I can't believe...what is happening. How does a pervert have so much strength? Or is it that I am too weak?"

“You’re not weak. Actually, you’re quite strong. As strong as Viktor is right now, roughly. If I had fought you before fighting him, I might have had a harder time. And, just saying, I’m not a pervert.”

Kelvin drew Mad Holy Sword Clive from its scabbard and imbued it with MP as he walked over to where Sebasdel lay on the ground. In a moment, the blade was surrounded by a whirlwind that made it vibrate with a metallic ring.

“Don’t worry, I won’t kill you. I will finish you off, though.”

“What...does that mean?”

“I mean, I can’t have you interrupting my fight with Gustav. Wait a minute, but if you actually do— Hm?”

In the split second Kelvin had hesitated, his sharpened senses picked up on someone rapidly flying towards the room from the outside. A moment later, they crashed through the wall. Judging by Sebasdel’s astonished expression, he had not expected it either.

The interloper got up and brushed herself off, mumbling, “Jeez, she’s way too rough when she fights.”

“Bell-sama?”

“Sebas? Ah, so this is the Tower of Trials. No wonder it looks so much bigger in here than it does outside.”

The new arrival was none other than Bell Baal, who had been fighting with Sera until then. Blue wind whirled furiously around her legs over the purple greaves that she was wearing.

“Hold on, why’re you lying on the ground like a worm? You’re my butler. I worked hard to convince pa—father to keep you around because of your strength. Are you throwing my goodwill away? You look so pathetic right now, I can’t help but laugh.”

“I-I’m terribly sorry...” Sebasdel struggled to his feet under Bell’s sharp glare and sharper words.

Kelvin noticed—and he somewhat wished he hadn’t—that the demon was faintly blushing. He was feeling excited.

He's a pervert.

There was a demand for such things in this world.

"As for you"—Bell turned to Kelvin—"looks like you really did come to the Tower of Trials, Kelvin. Ah, you're Kelvin *Celsius* now, right?"

"Thank you for everything in Gaun. I didn't expect you to come in through the wall. Are you going to fight me yourself now?"

"I won't...let it happen!" Sebasdel growled, having somehow gathered the strength to climb to all fours. However, Bell's leg came down like an axe, slamming him back down to the black floor.

"Augh!"

"Sebas, be quiet like the loser you are. I don't have time."

Kelvin, who was now merely looking on, noticed that Sebasdel was actually smiling despite the fraught atmosphere and the pain of being stepped on.

Oh, he's definitely a pervert.

There was a demand for such things in this world. Probably.

"Now, unfortunately, I don't have the time to deal with you myself. In exchange for sending me flying all the way here, Sera Baal got thrown against my wind barrier. I've earned a bit of time, but not a lot. I have to get back soon. So I'll be leaving you to have fun with father."

"Fine by me; I was planning on doing just that from the start. Uh...it's a bit late for this, but I guess you really are Sera's little sister? Your sister has always taken great care of m—"

"Die."

"Wha— Why?!" What'd I do to deserve that?! And is that jealousy on Sebasdel's face?!

"Tch, forget it. You know what? I'll leave you a little something."

"Such as?"

"You'll like it, I'm sure."

Bell pressed down even harder with the foot she had on Sebasdel's back, making the tip of her greave dig deeper and deeper into his body.



“B-Bell-sama?! Ah, urk, ugh...”

“I’ve used Color Corrosion to enable Sebas to temporarily perform to his top limit. And you, don’t enjoy this. You disgust me. Want me to diminish your sense of pain?”

“Uerghhh...hng...ng!”

The sight that ensued seemed to be an enactment of a specific type of fetish, one that might make some wish to turn away. Kelvin found himself unsure whether he should call for a stop to such a cruel display.

It’s practically a public execution. But Sebasdel’s a genuine pervert, so I guess he’s fine? I can almost hear him begging her in his mind to not diminish his sense of pain.

After careful consideration, Kelvin decided not to say anything. The biggest factor was that he was looking forward to what would be happening next. So he continued to just watch. Soon after, Bell pulled back her greave and unleashed a sharp kick that splattered all the blood on the ground.

“Arrrghhhh!”

“All done. I’m leaving, then. Enjoy yourself, Kelvin Celsius. Just saying, though, father is much, much stronger.”

Bell shot back out through the hole she had made in the wall through blasts of air ejected from the vents of her greaves, leaving behind one very changed demon.



The top floor of the Tower of Trials was a dark and gloomy room lined with skulls and demonic sculptures that seemed extremely fitting for a Demon Lord. Just like the others, this floor was more spacious inside than it appeared from the outside, but with much greater proportions. At the far end of the room was a throne that looked very similar to the one in the throne room of the Demon Lord Castle, positioned high enough to command a complete view of the dimly lit hall. However, the demon who should have been occupying that seat was nowhere in sight.

A slight distance away from the throne was an awe-inspiring statue of the Darkness Dragon King. The wall behind this statue actually had a secret window that gave a view of the outside.

“There she goes,” murmured a demon larger in stature than Gerard, who was hunched up behind the window with binoculars pressed to his eyes. This figure with curved horns on his head that greatly resembled Sera’s, enormous wings on his back, and a powerful, muscular tail, was the very person who had once been defeated by the previous Hero, the historic conqueror of Abyssland, the king of demons, and the one known as Redbeard, among countless other names. However, now that he was free of Mara Pisuna, the skill that had turned him into a Demon Lord, he was back to his old self.

“Another day of my daughters looking as proud and beautiful as ever. I’m willing to beat down anyone who doesn’t think they’re the most beautiful in the world.”

Simply put, this man’s “old self” was that of an incorrigible doting parent, and his name was Gustav Baal. As the saying went, idiots would remain idiots even in death, and sure enough, dying and being resurrected had done nothing to reform Gustav’s idiotic levels of indulgence.

“Oh, Sera, thank you for growing up with that open and simple nature of yours. You are the spitting image of your mother, Eliza, just with an even better figure. One full-faced smile from you emits enough energy to pulverize an entire enemy nation. Your charm holds all the men in the world slaves to your bidding. Despite being a demon, you shine on the foolish masses like a sun. A demonic sun. I know this to be true because I am your father. As such, I will personally squash anyone who attempts to get close to you.”

Gustav clenched a fist and began passionately monologuing for no reason.

“Oh, Bell, your growth may have stopped prematurely, but that is only more reason for me to love you twice as much. It is no exaggeration to say that you shine like an untouchable flower among the chaff in the world. You may seem cold and unfeeling, but I know that you actually take things to heart much more than the average person, and that makes you unbearably cute. You express love in roundabout and secretive ways that tickle my heart and make me writhe with

affection. This, too, is demonic. Truly demonic. Both my daughters are terrifying demons in their own right. As such, I will execute anyone who approaches them.”

Gustav unleashed a blast of killing intent that slammed into a nearby sculpture, cracking it. The phenomenon almost seemed like a measure of how furious the demon currently was.

“I forced a life of isolation on Sera and Bell to protect them from the turmoil of the world, including the danger of a coup to overthrow my tyrannical rule, the repeated assaults of the maddened vampire queen, and most of all, the gazes of the base men who would seek to target the two of them. I did it for their sakes, and yet I know I have wronged them dearly.”

The demon suddenly clutched his head.

“However. HOWEVER! Now I know beyond a doubt that my actions were correct! Indeed, after I was resurrected, Bell told me that the hooligan named Kelvin has made Sera his ■■■■■■■■■■!!!”

The Darkness Dragon King sculpture fell victim to Gustav’s fist and shattered into countless pieces. The fury that racked him as he stomped over the ground was so terrible that his words were turning into unintelligible curses. Although he was not aware of it himself, his curses were so potent that a normal person would immediately begin frothing at the mouth and pass out from hearing a single syllable.

“I have made my decision, and there is no revoking this! I shall burn Kelvin’s name onto the very top of my list of people I must kill. The moment he comes up here, battered and worn out from his battle with Sebas—who I only barely allow to live by the auspices of the daughter who is as kind as she is beautiful, Bell—I shall crush him like the bug he is. He shall consider it an honor.”

Gustav’s logic was truly self-serving and entirely one-sided, being an extreme example of a typical demon’s character. There was no doubt in his mind, no hesitation, and no mercy. The only thing that existed was thought of the righteous judgment that he would pronounce on the dastardly scoundrels who dared lay hands on his beloved daughters.

Suddenly, the door to this room, which was filled to bursting with killing

intent, banged open, and someone burst in with great velocity, sliding on the ground as if he had been thrown. He struggled to get up on all fours, looking up at his lord.

“G-Gu...”

“Why are you here, Sebasdel?”

The butler’s breathing was shallow, and he bore severe wounds all over. His normally neatly combed hair and wrinkle-free uniform were thoroughly mussed up, with the latter being not only dirtied but shredded in multiple places. Despite all this, there was a touch of bliss in his expression.

Perhaps I really should have killed him off at the start, Gustav thought as he looked down at his retainer. Unbeknownst to Sebasdel, he had just taken one step towards being erased.

“I confess I actually really enjoyed that. I was so excited, all my senses were heightened when we suddenly went for round two of reading each other and exchanging blows—boy, was that fun! At the end, he tried shrinking the size of the room itself to crush me to death! Brilliant idea, really.”

A black-robed man walked through the doors, looking even more blissful than Sebasdel. In one hand, he held a holy sword that was giving off a repulsive aura, and in the other, he held a wing that he had torn from Sebasdel’s back.

“Unfortunately, the walls were too weak, and he was overly reliant on his skills. Here, you can have your wing back. Don’t worry; I’ll reattach it with White Magic later and you’ll be as good as new.” The man carelessly draped the wing over the butler’s body. “So, this floor is...” He retraced his steps to head back out and read the plaque above the doors. “The Trial of Conviction? Uh, are we skipping the trial part and going straight to where I get convicted, father-in-law?”

Kelvin had also just taken one step towards being erased, but in his case, it was intentional.

The veins on Gustav’s temple visibly bulged, but he was smiling just as much as Kelvin was. Apparently, humans and demons were the same in that they would naturally smile once they surpassed a certain threshold of anger. The air

was heavy with even more killing intent than before, adding to the frightfulness of the place.

“This is the Trial of Conviction. Nay, it is but an execution ground *called* a trial. And you are the one to be executed, of course.”

“We haven’t even spoken. Can I not at least introduce myself?”

“There is no need. I have heard all I need from Bell. You need not speak another word. Just die.”

Fresh blood suddenly streamed out from where Gustav had clenched his fist so hard his nails had punctured the skin, forming a yanyuedao that he held in a firm grip.

Ah, he has Bloodbending.

The sight immediately reminded Kelvin of the Unique Skill Sera possessed that enabled her to control blood however she wanted.

“I see you like to get straight to the point. No wonder you’re Sera’s father. Oh, father-in-law, Sera’s always been great to m—”

“Just. DIE!”

In the blink of an eye, the yanyuedao was already stabbing the ground where Kelvin had been standing, the sonic boom caused by its flight following a beat later. However, the battle junkie managed to dodge it thanks to the multiple fights that he had just finished. His senses were still heightened.

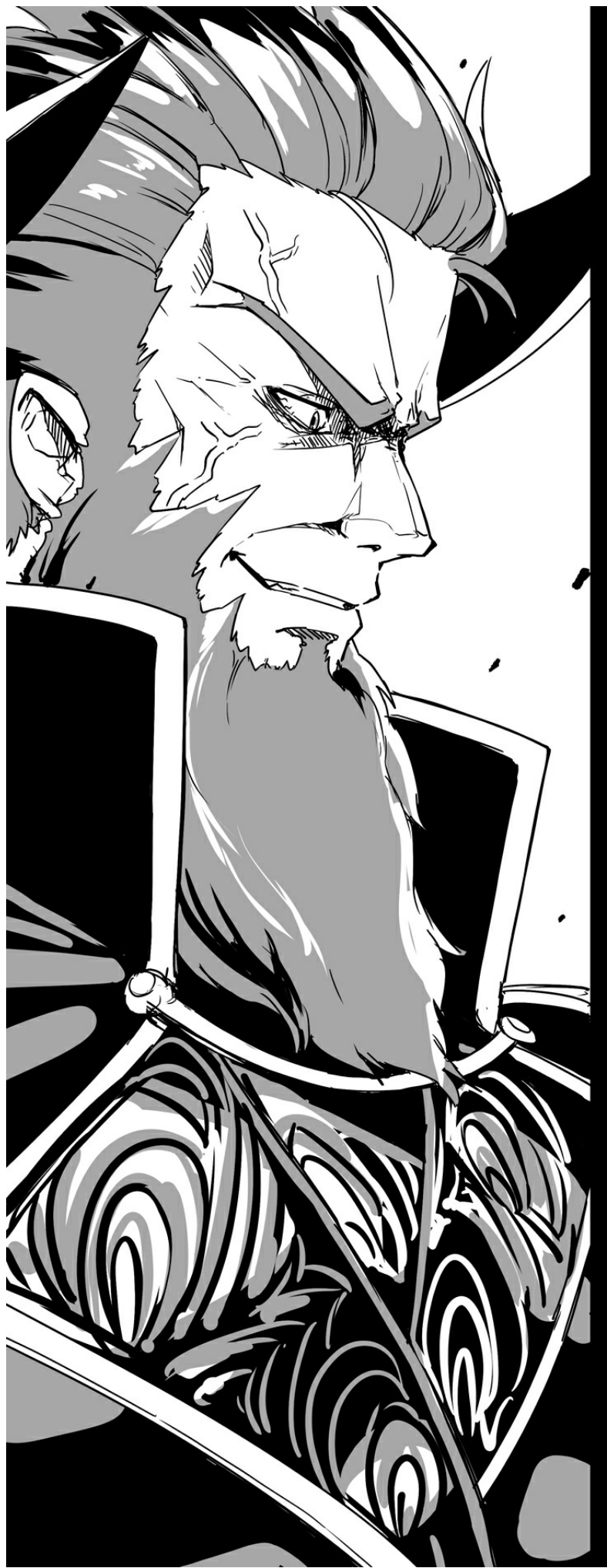
“Ha ha ha! Your reaction is exactly like hers! Like father, like daughter for sure! What do I do now? This could be a problem!” Needless to say, Kelvin did not look troubled in the slightest.

“Rest assured, I am turning you into an unfeeling corpse right now.”

“Then I guess I’ll have to defend myself. By the way, are you sure we don’t need to move that butler over there out of the way? An attack might accidentally hit him.”

“Now that is a matter you truly need not worry yourself about. I couldn’t ask for a better opportunity; I shall end both of you at the same time!”

Kelvin shot a quick glance at the butler, who was on the verge of taking a trip to happy dreamland, thinking, *Oh, so Gustav does actually intend to kill him.*





When Gustav had thrown his yanyuedao earlier, he had done so with such force that it should have destroyed everything all the way down to the first floor and brought the entire tower down. Surprisingly, however, the floor remained intact. In fact, it wasn't even scratched.

His weapon turned back into blood!

Right before crashing into the ground, the yanyuedao had returned to its liquid form. The momentum made the blood splash down, covering a large portion of the floor.

"You managed to dodge that. So you do have some ability," Gustav growled, running a hand through his crimson beard as he looked at Kelvin with appreciation for the first time.

Kelvin, however, was nowhere near as composed. If Sera's skill set was any indication, he knew that he would lose control over any part of his body that made contact with the blood on the ground. If Gustav also had Bloodbending—and he probably did—it meant all the blood puddles were now traps.

He should have used up quite a lot of blood making that large weapon. And yet he doesn't look tired in the slightest.

A human would have died losing the amount of blood needed to create Gustav's weapon just now, but for the former Demon Lord, the amount was only akin to ripping off a scab. He already had a fresh yanyuedao in his hand, the threatening aura that he was emanating not having diminished in the slightest. It was probably wise not to count on him overusing his abilities and dying from blood loss.

"Good. This is good! If you're getting serious, father-in-law, then I am too!"

The hostility in the air grew even sharper. Just as Kelvin thought, every time he spoke the taboo word, the room was growing increasingly more charged. The demon's eyes burned red like flames in exactly the same way Sera's did when she was furious. No upper limit to this phenomenon was in sight, and every time it got even more intense, the corners of Kelvin's mouth curled up another notch.

“However, there is indeed the small problem of there being someone in the way. Let’s let him leave the stage first.”

Kelvin, who was using Fly to hover in midair, thrust a hand towards Sebasdel, the butler who might or might not have been having a great dream about being hauled over the coals by his charge. A circular hole suddenly appeared in the floor underneath him and dropped him to a lower floor without giving him time to scream.

“What was that for?”

“Having a stupid face like that around would be distracting for both of us. Don’t worry, Viktor is down below, so he’ll probably take care of him. Of course, you can feel free to add the bloodlust you had for him on top of what you’re directing at me. You know the saying about chasing two rabbits, right?”

“Now that’s a fine thing to say for a man who tried to lay hands on both of my beloved daughters.”

“I keep trying to tell you guys that it’s a misunderstanding. You and the butler just now are a bit too blinded by your love for your girls, father-in—”

“NO MORE TALK!”

Gustav swung his yanyuedao and took a step forward, assuming a pose that looked quite similar to how the Cardinal Rages looked before charging. However, the power in his coiled form was far beyond that of the golems, which were already Rank S. The former Demon Lord was an absolute monster, one that was easily the equal of Sera when she was going all out or when she was under the influence of alcohol. In other words, Gustav Baal definitely had the strength to kill Kelvin.

So scary. Whew, a drunken Sera really is scary.

There had been numerous occasions when Kelvin’s life was threatened by Sera when she was drunk. By now, he had worked out ways to deal with her so that he could get away with only severe injuries, but there was no changing the fact that it was a terrifying experience. And now, Gustav was approaching him with the same temperament, being equally impossible to talk to.

The higher-rank a spell, the longer it took to activate. The amount of time

could be shortened based on the caster's ability, but the usage of Overclock, Kelvin's new Unique Skill, to pump a spell with more MP than it would normally take to amplify its effects lengthened the casting time once more. Sonic Acceleration and Air Pressure were two spells that he could currently cast in a powerful form fast enough not to require any chanting. Right before Gustav closed in and brought his weapon down, Kelvin unleashed those two spells concurrently.

Dual Sonic Acceleration! Triple Air Pressure!

"Wh— Mere insolence!" Gustav roared as he swung his red blade.

Kelvin jerked his head back, allowing the attack to pass by right before his eyes. He would have died then and there if not for Sonic Acceleration. Triple Air Pressure, which had been effective enough to stop Viktor in his Evolved form, was definitely weighing Gustav down, but the former Demon Lord's movements were still quicker than Kelvin's, and he did not look all that bothered.

The stone sculptures that lined the Trial of Conviction room were crushed into tiny fragments which then became tiny particles that filled the room like a dust cloud. The two opponents could no longer see each other, but they could still accurately tell where the other was. Unsurprisingly, Gustav, being Sera's and Bell's father, had incredible detection abilities. Not being able to see did not slow him down at all. Things were even simpler on Kelvin's end. He had detection skills too, yes, but he didn't have to use them. All he had to do was follow Gustav's glowing red eyes, which were clearly visible even through the fog.

"Hnnnggg!"

Gustav realized his feet were sinking. It turned out to be a quagmire the color of poison that Kelvin had made by casting Dual Contaminated Mud Bind on the ground on the closest path between himself and Gustav. The powered-up quagmire now sucked Gustav's great form down deeper and deeper.

It'd be great if the poison could get into his body through his wounds, but I guess that's too much to— HUH?!

The red lights of Gustav's eyes were closing in, meaning that he had already broken free. The next instant, he burst from the cloud, shouting, "Just like your

character, the way you fight is devious!”

“I did promise to give it my all!”

Always one to keep his promises, Kelvin had every intention of using everything at his disposal in this fight. Parallel Processing was running at full capacity as he observed Gustav in increments of milliseconds. The bog stain on the tip of the yanyuedao blade did not escape his attention.

He must have melted a bit of his blood into the quagmire and used Blood Dominion to order it to harden!

Kelvin had designed the spell himself, making it so that victims would sink deeper the more they struggled. Gustav might have caught on in a split second after he got stuck in it and, without looking, promptly figured out the best way to escape. He was acting like someone who was just brandishing his weapon in a blind rage, but he still had the ability to make very good situation calls.

Oh, I’m sure we’ll get along just fine!

The self-claimed rational battle junkie (one-sidedly) felt a connection with Sera’s father and rejoiced at finding what he thought was someone who shared his views. He cheerily drew Mad Holy Sword Clive.

CLAAAANG!

The sound of blades clashing reverberated through the air. Kelvin was at a slight advantage due to having a shorter and more maneuverable weapon. However, Gustav had far more power, and every clash sent a shock wave that shook the very core of Kelvin’s being and fanned the terror in his heart. One slipup, no matter how small, and he would be at death’s door. If he wasn’t a battle junkie, he would have long since run away with tears streaming down his face.

Gotta watch out for when the blood changes from solid to liq— Oof! That was close, WHOO!

Most people would not be enjoying themselves in this situation. But Kelvin was not “most people.” He enveloped Clive’s blade in wind so it wouldn’t touch the yanyuedao’s blade directly. If even a drop fell on the holy sword, Kelvin could easily see it going rogue by either turning on him or being ordered to

destroy itself.

“■■■■■■■■■!”

The sight of the repulsive blade must have tipped Gustav over the edge as he started loading his words with curses. Kelvin couldn’t make out what he had actually said; all he knew was that every syllable that entered his ears induced a stabbing pang of pain that felt like there were maggots boring through his brain.

“Ugh!”

Gritting his teeth and ignoring the sensation, Kelvin focused only on the crimson slashes rushing his way. He wanted to clutch his head and curl up in the fetal position, and he would have if he was alone. He wanted so badly to tear at his own brain. That was how powerful Gustav’s curse-laden words were. It was as if all that was wrong with the world, every drop of envy and hatred in existence, was being packed together and forcibly shoved through the cracks of his heart.

Gotta thank...Melfina...again!

Although he had been hit by the curses at close range, Kelvin was wearing the ring that Melfina had made him, Goddess’s Ring, which gave him a certain amount of resistance against debuffs. It was thanks to this ring that his brain didn’t immediately turn to goo. If he hadn’t been wearing it, the pain would have been at least twice as bad.

“Y■■ m■■ die ■■■! C■■e, I ■■■■ll a■■ you!”

Despite still being racked with pain, Kelvin’s smile remained. The pain made the experience feel more real, being a special kind of enjoyment that could be had only when facing an overwhelmingly powerful opponent. Kelvin was currently experiencing literal heaven on earth...or hell, as it were. He wouldn’t be able to stop smiling even if he wanted to.

“If you get too angry, it’ll make your blood pressure rise, father-in-law!”

“Don’t ■■■ d■■e ■■■ll m■ f■■■■r-■■-■■w!”

Kelvin was aware that he was the reason Gustav was so angry, and he was

purposely choosing his words to add oil to the flames. Sure enough, the former Demon Lord grew increasingly enraged, and his appearance turned more and more demonic. If one of the Four Demonic Generals saw him in this state, they would have thought it was their last day in this world.

Truthfully, Kelvin did not want to be taunting his girlfriend's father. However, he had made a terrible discovery. Namely, the angrier Gustav was, the sharper and more powerful his attacks became. This battle junkie was someone who was willing to go so far as to train up a group of disciples and wait for them to get strong just to get a good fight. There was no way he could simply ignore what he had learned about Gustav. It would be such a wasted opportunity! So every chance he got, he sprinkled in the term "father-in-law" in the lines he threw out.

Kelvin's analysis was very close to how things actually were. Other than Bloodbending and Blood Dominion, Gustav had a third Unique Skill, Wrath, which boosted his Strength, Endurance, and Agility stats the more enraged he became, eventually turning even his words into a means of attack. This was the reason his words were turning into curses and he was growing more powerful every time Kelvin called him "father-in-law."

It wasn't long before Gustav grew too much for Kelvin to handle. He swung his yanyuedao with more power than Gerard, and his skin became so tough that Clive, even when enchanted with Vortex Edge, bounced off it without having done any damage. Boreas Death Scythe probably could still cut through it, but because the move required very large movements, Kelvin had to be careful when he used it. The biggest factor that made Gustav so hard to deal with was the speed of his attacks. Kelvin was at such a disadvantage that he felt like he was fighting Melfina. This battle junkie was quite proud of the fact that he was fast enough for his eyes to keep up with Ange's movements in their practice matches, but even he was finally nicked by Gustav's yanyuedao blade.

"Ugh!"

It was a tiny scratch, really; an extremely shallow cut on the chest that he could have laughed off if it had been caused by any other weapon. However, this was a blade made of Gustav's blood, and thanks to Blood Dominion, even the slightest contact meant game over.

“D■■!”

That was very clearly “Die!” Gustav’s malicious roar prompted the blood from his blade that had been left inside Kelvin’s wound to invade his body and head straight for his heart. Once there, it could block up his heart, rip a hole in it, or directly order it to stop. Either way, his death was now certain.

“Ha ha...ha ha ha...HA HA HA HA!”

The one who suddenly burst into laughter was not Gustav but Kelvin. Gustav wondered if his opponent had gone mad from fear, but he pulled the trigger regardless. More than enough time had passed for his blood to reach the Grim Reaper’s heart. The order he gave was, “Stop his heart.”

Kelvin sighed with ecstasy. “Oh, I feel so happy.”

“W■■■■...”

The demon gave the order again and again, but the Grim Reaper remained on his feet, his face filled with bliss as he basked in a euphoric glow.

“W■■...a■■■’t ■o■ d■■d?!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, father-in-law. It’s my first time feeling so excited, so you might have seen me look a little beside myself. It’s not often that I feel so loved in the middle of a fight.”

“Wh■■ ■r■ y■■ s■■■■g?”

“I really love how your voice just has a way of resonating directly inside my head. It’s been really stimulating my brain. Oh, excuse me. Actually, I’m a Summoner, so...I hope you don’t mind me relying on a little bit of this kind of support.”

“Ag■■n, w■■t ■■■e y■■ s■y■■■?”

Kelvin reached down the front of his robe and brought out the Blood Pendant that Sera had gifted him. As it turned out, the moment he had been cut by Gustav, the blood in there had rushed out to block Gustav’s blood from getting into the wound. There was a lot more of Sera’s blood than Gustav’s, so the former had completely obliterated the latter. Kelvin had no idea what command Sera had given her blood when she had sealed it into this pendant;

for all he knew, she might have foreseen the possibility of Gustav going after Kelvin's life. Regardless, the realization of what had happened made Kelvin feel extremely loved, bringing him to a state of ecstatic delight despite the fact that he was in the middle of a fight. He almost looked like he was high.

"Don't tell me, that blood is...!"

Someone who was as much of a doting parent as Gustav naturally recognized his daughter's ability with a single glance. After getting rid of Gustav's blood, Sera's wrapped itself around Kelvin as if nuzzling his cheek, making him look even happier. From Gustav's point of view, it was as if he were watching his daughter flirting with her boyfriend. His emotions were running as high as Kelvin's.

Now then...

It was true that Kelvin was in a very excited state, but he was also calmly assessing the situation through other trains of thought under Parallel Processing. While purposely egging Gustav on, he had noticed that Gustav's Unique Skill was reaching the upper limit of how high it could buff his stats. That meant this was the best timing to make his own move. When he had laughed out loud earlier, he had also slipped in a bit of chanting to bolster his own body.

I'm finally done preparing the time-consuming Quad spells. The ability to put on a convincing act is also an important skill in fighting. What? I was acting. Really, I was.

Kelvin slowly lifted Clive in his right hand and thrust his left hand forward. More of Sera's blood gushed out from the pendant and formed a crimson dagger in his hand.

Ooooooh, the blood actually listens to me!

The sight of Gustav's yanyuedao had given Kelvin the idea to attempt to direct a telepathic message towards Sera's blood. He was pleasantly surprised when it did what he asked. It seemed safe to assume that at least for the duration of this fight, it was willing to follow his orders.

"All right, father-in-law. Let's move on to the final phase of—"

Kelvin was turning to Gustav in high spirits when his words died in his mouth.

The former Demon Lord's veins could be seen throbbing all over his body, vividly demonstrating how enraged he was. The blood vessels bulged more and more prominently until they actually burst, with the blood that sprayed everywhere quickly hardening into weapons. Multiple horns now protruded from his head, vicious-looking blades and claws from his arms, and bones from his torso, which looked like extensions of his ribs. His yanyuedao also got a fresh infusion of blood, making it even more massive than before.

"You're dead."

"W-Weapons all over? Oh...*gulp*." The fact that Kelvin actually had saliva trickling from his mouth at this moment meant he probably didn't have enough of a moral high ground to chastise Colette and Melfina.

After wiping away the proof of his desire, Kelvin immediately rushed at Gustav, as the buffs that he had cast on himself during the brief moments he'd had the opportunity were not going to last long. Gustav's strength had likely peaked, so it was time to bring the fight to a climax. Quick and decisive was going to be the key to victory.

"D■■!"

Despite how large his yanyuedao had become, Gustav was still swinging it with a single hand, making no effort to hide just how powerful he was. The horizontal sweep he unleashed shook the ground and granted death to everything it touched.

That's his fastest attack so far! However...

Had Kelvin been his normal self, this attack would have killed him before he could react. But this battle junkie's mind was now the most heightened it had ever been, being on par with that of Colette's during one of her episodes. The adrenaline that was flooding through his system enabled him to see the most minute detail of the crimson blade closing in on him.

Additionally, he was currently buffed with Quad Sonic Acceleration. When Overclocked to this level, this spell had a very short duration, but its effects were tremendous. In exchange for even more MP than it took to cast a Rank S spell, Kelvin's Agility was boosted to five times its normal number. Having become faster than even Ange, he ducked under Gustav's attack and adjusted

his grip on his two weapons.

“Ru■ h■m ■■r■gh!”

Kelvin felt death approaching from behind his back. The instant the yanyuedao passed by him, it had lost its form and changed to liquid. A large volume of Gustav’s blood froze in midair, then turned into thousands of needles that shot towards Kelvin from behind.

“Quad Impact!”

An incredible shock wave blasted the space behind Kelvin’s back. Though numerous, the needles were light and could therefore be easily blown away. Since Impact was a Rank E spell, Kelvin could cast the Quad version of it instantly without any chanting. Due to this, blasting away incoming attacks with an incredibly powerful Impact was now a valid strategy in Kelvin’s arsenal. The force was so great that it blew a hole in the wall of the tower, but that was par for the course.

The wind generated by Quad Impact pushed Kelvin to even greater speeds. He dodged both the extended ribs and the blades on Gustav’s arms to finally get inside the demon’s space. Kelvin used all the swordsmanship he had developed and the Dual Wield skill he had borrowed from Rion to land attacks on Gustav’s unguarded abdomen like rain.

“Y■■...ins■■t!”

“Says the one who’s tough like he has an exoskeleton!”

Not only was Kelvin using his newly made dagger of blood, he was also whaling on Gustav with a holy sword enchanted with Ground Cleave and Vortex Edge, with both spells having been Quad, to boot. Even so, the flurry of attacks he dealt did not cut very deep as Wrath had hardened the demon’s skin far beyond expectations. Even though Kelvin had not expected this barrage to do much and was only relying on it as a distraction, he could not help but be surprised by how ineffective it was.

“Y■■r ■ff■■t■ ■r■ u■■■■ss!”

Kelvin was satisfied with having made Gustav bleed, so when he saw new weapons starting to protrude from the shallow wounds he had made, he

figured there was no need to overstay his welcome. As expected, a spear promptly shot out from the demon's abdomen. Kelvin dodged it easily while checking Gustav's Status and realized that none of Clive's curses remained.

So, curses don't work on him, and Sera's Blood Dominion can't do much against the overwhelming amount of blood that he has.

The blood flowing inside Gustav's veins was naturally under his control via Blood Dominion. Even if Kelvin used his dagger to get some of Sera's blood onto the demon, it would simply be overwhelmed. Instead, Kelvin had decided to go tit for tat and ordered it to invade Gustav's body in the way Sera's blood had prevented just now.

The curses from Clive were equally ineffective. In fact, the words coming from Gustav's mouth were absorbing the curses that Clive was leaving, which increased the intensity of the pain being sent directly to Kelvin's brain. The burden was getting to be so great that blood was trickling down both his cheeks and from his nose.

"Hmph!"

Kelvin circled around to Gustav's back and launched a barrage of attacks so fast that even the demon could not follow them with his eyes. When parting from her earlier, he had borrowed Ange's Assassin Strike using the side of Skill Eater that wasn't already using Rion's Dual Wield. Now, every attack he dealt that Gustav did not expect was guaranteed to be a Critical Hit, enabling him to do a significant amount of damage despite the demon's ironlike skin. At least, that was the plan Kelvin had had in mind.

"T■■ bad f■■ y■■, w■■m!"

Unfortunately, the attacks from the back did not land. It was true that Gustav could not follow attacks this fast with his eyes, but he had outstanding detection abilities that told him Kelvin's exact location. This prevented Assassin's Strike from ever activating, rendering all of the attacks that landed as ineffective as before.

"Ugh!"

The countless gashes in Gustav's back only turned into openings through

which countless needles were fired. They lengthened in a way that made it look like Gustav was a hedgehog shooting missiles from his back. What were supposed to be sharp, thrusting attacks were so numerous that it was impossible to blow them all away using Impact, and they formed a wall that left Kelvin with nowhere to go. He was doing his best using the two weapons in his hands to deal with everything coming his way, but he still ended up taking scratches on his cheek and arm. Sera was able to protect him if the amount of blood that got onto him was not all that much. However, his buffs were running out soon.

“■■’s o■■r!”

“No, father-in-law, things are only just beginning!”

To explain again, Kelvin was currently just as excited as Colette frequently got. Just like Colette was so single-minded in her worship that it bordered on the insane, Kelvin was now occupied solely with how to defeat Gustav. He furiously brainstormed paths to victory without tiring of the effort, never having gotten close to considering giving up. Having learned from the lessons from his past, he resolved to take out the former Demon Lord without letting him get away and without dying himself. In short, Kelvin was no quitter. And soon, he had finished his chanting, despite having been parrying attacks the whole time.

“Subsidence Quake.”

This was a Rank S Green Magic spell that induced a massive earthquake shaking all surfaces that Kelvin considered ground within his view to the point of destruction. Kelvin had decided never to use it outside, as it would cause a catastrophe. However, things were different now that he was indoors. If he purposely did not look at the part of the wall with a hole that revealed the view outside, he could only see the ground of this room where the Trial of Conviction was being held. Since this was the top floor, even if it shook, it would only be shaking itself.

Ruuuuuumb.

Kelvin was trying to be considerate, but what he had done was definitely the death knell of the Tower of Trials.

“U■■! W■■■ h■v■ you d■■■ ■o ■■e t■■■r?!”

“Father-in-law, I’m pretty sure we each only have one attack left. Let’s enjoy ourselves!”

The great earthquake was tearing the room apart. The epicenter was set at the space between the fifth and fourth floors, but the vibrations were traveling to the outer wall of the tower, shaking loose large chunks of rubble that were hitting the lower floors. There was no doubt that the entire tower was collapsing soon. The walls closed in as the ability that Sebasdel had used to make the rooms more spacious lost its hold.

“Hmph!”

The floor fell away underneath Gustav, but he quickly spread his wings to arrest his fall.

“Where is he?”

Kelvin was nowhere in sight, hidden by the rain of falling rubble, prompting Gustav to turn to his detection skills.

Wait, why am I sensing fifty of him?!

A large number of presences bearing Kelvin’s signature had formed a perimeter on the other side of the rubble. Magic Detection immediately told Gustav this was a magical trick, but he had no way of knowing which “Kelvin” was the real one. It was clear that his opponent’s strategy was to blend in with all the copies. All of them were rushing at Gustav, clearly meant as a cover for Kelvin to close the distance.

“That’s the important one! Very well, I shall erase all of you!”

The demon turned the weapons attached to the wounds all over his body into high-caliber bullets and blasted them in 360 degrees. As it was said, a good offense was the greatest defense. He continued firing for a while, making it look like a red rose was blooming in the sky. Kelvin should have been within range of this attack, wherever he was hiding, but it was not clear whether he had actually been hit.

“Hn?!”

Gustav felt something piercing one of his wings. He looked and found Mad

Holy Sword Clive running all the way through it. His reaction had become delayed by the slightest bit due to him focusing on attacking. Losing one of his wings had robbed him of his mobility, leading to him plunging to the ground. By this point, the numerous presences all around were nearly right on top of him.

“Phew...”

Ignoring the three large holes penetrating his body, Kelvin brought his scythe to bear. Sera’s blood was plugging the holes to prevent him from bleeding out as a stopgap measure, as he had no time to heal himself. More importantly, all his effort would have been for nothing if Gustav had identified him as the real Kelvin just because he used another spell. The only spell he would cast was Boreas Death Scythe, and even that, he would only cast right before the moment he attacked, when he was dead certain the hit would land.

Originally, the Rank E White Magic spell Blink was used by those who needed rescuing to magnify their own magical signature in lieu of a distress signal. When the tower was collapsing, Kelvin had spammed his own variation of the spell, Lure Blink, which copied a target’s magical signature to an orb of magic that could be thrown. These orbs were invisible and harmless but extremely reactive to detection skills. As this was a skill that Kelvin had secretly developed to use against Sera, Gustav had easily fallen for it too.

“Thank you very much, father-in-law! I’ll be in your care going forward!”

“Then eat this!”

A passionate fist packed with pure fury slammed straight into Kelvin’s face as a Grim Reaper’s scythe sliced Gustav apart. Efil telepathically reached out to Melfina in a panic as she watched the two combatants falling limply along with the rubble of the collapsing tower.



A memory from long, long ago was coming to mind. A memory of the days I spent with my beloved wife, Eliza. A memory of the happiest days of my life.

The two of us were not born nobles. We were born into an unremarkable village, and we had been together as long as I could remember. Ever since she was young, Eliza had collapsed often from a weak constitution, and it was

always up to me to pick her back up. However, at the same time, she had a core of steel. Even though everyone else in the village called me a hooligan and gave up on me, she alone had no qualms about letting me know exactly what she was thinking, scolding me when I needed it and, for some reason, following me. Of course, she would then soon run out of breath because of her low stamina and throw a tantrum until I gave her a piggyback ride.

Soon, I had gotten so good at fighting that not even the adults in the village could beat me. In fact, I had gotten so good, they were afraid of me, saying I had “gotten out of hand” and shunning me. And yet, not only was Eliza not scared of me, she even pestered me for things and always had a ready smile for me. Oh, and she could hold down her alcohol way better than I could. Wine was like water to her. That’s the kind of woman Eliza was.

Maybe that was why—or maybe it was just because we had been in each other’s lives from the very start—I, who only knew how to be violent, started feeling drawn to her. Ha ha, what a simple guy I was. I basically just fell into the lap of the first person who was nice to me, didn’t I? But then again, I *was* in my adolescence at the time, and I suppose that’s just how adolescent boys are. Indeed, that is how they are. And honestly, I never again met anyone who approached me the way Eliza did.

A while later, we left our village. Or, put in a nicer way, we went on a journey. We’d gotten sick of the insular community. Rumors had sprung up about Eliza, who was still the only person who actually cared about me. She said she didn’t mind, but I did, and my fists were already flying before I knew it. I was in the middle of giving the guy a thorough thrashing when she desperately begged me to stop, so I did. Since she was the one asking, I obliged. But soon, a fresh wave of rumors cropped up.

After we went through this cycle several times, I grabbed Eliza’s hand and left the village. Thankfully, neither of us had parents, so there was no one to stop us. However, I did regret moving on impulse. Just a little. When I came to, we were already outside the gates. I feared no one and nothing at the time, but I was so scared of looking at her face. Would the journey be too stressful for her frail body? And despite how our village was, it was still our home. Did I make her sad?

As it turned out, however, Eliza was exuberant. She paused her humming and turned to me with sparkling eyes. “Say, I want to see the ocean! It’s not like you have anywhere in particular to go, right? So let’s travel the world and see all the interesting sights. I’m sure we’ll have so much fun. Don’t worry about money, because I’ve brought everything we’ll need. If you’re dreading the awkwardness of having to go back to the village after storming out in a huff, I’ve got you!”

“Are you serious?”

I turned to look at Eliza and found her with a backpack filled to bursting with travel necessities. Apparently, she’d known I would do this one day and had prepared for it beforehand. She even had a map she had bought from a traveling peddler, which was already marked all over with places she wanted to visit.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked worriedly. “It’s not too late—”

She put a finger to my lips. “Nope, I don’t want to hear any more. The only person in that village who took care of sickly old me was you. Also, a place without you in it would be so boring, I wouldn’t be able to stand it.”

When she grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze, I realized something about myself. *Oh. I’m in love with her.*

“That said, I can’t take another step. Piggyback, please.”

I gave Eliza a look, then shouldered her and her big bag, opened the map, and headed for the ocean. According to her, she had gotten so used to being on my back that it gave her more energy than sleeping in a bed. So she was always in a good mood when she was on my back. *I have been carrying her since we were children, after all.*

After that, we traveled the breadth of Abyssland. Because Eliza said she wanted to visit the ocean, we went to the Blood Sea. She said she wanted to have a chat with the Darkness Dragon King, so we went to Shadow Gaol. The journey was far from peaceful, but it proved to be great training for me. Eliza remained in her VIP seat on my back as I tore through all our opponents. I awakened to Blood Dominion and, to my chagrin, fell sick with a fever, but Eliza took excellent care of me during that time. And this is hardly surprising, but we became lovers during the trip.

When we had gone to pretty much all the places we wanted to, Eliza suggested that we find a place to settle down. There happened to be a castle close by, so I went in with fists swinging and, like the demon I was, took it by force. After I mopped the floor with the soldiers and put the screws on the lord of the castle, the environment in the vicinity gradually became much more pleasant.

“Wow, the climate’s changing! It’s my first time seeing this phenomenon in person. It means Abyssland has acknowledged you as the boss of this region!”

“Is that how it works?”

“I’m sure it is, because it’s become a place that’s just perfect for me to live in. It fits you to a tee, with how you’re all prickly on the outside but so kind at heart.”

“Wait, what’d you say about me?”

My objections to Eliza’s characterization of me aside, this was how the great Empire of Grebarelka began. I had no interest in invading our neighbors, but Abyssland was a place where other countries would attack yours even if you didn’t theirs. I showed no mercy to those who were trying to get in the way of our life together and smacked down everyone who sent armies at us. Before I knew it, I was known as Redbeard, and many who had heard of the strength I had developed throughout my travels were knocking on my door, begging for the opportunity to serve me.

The more I fought, the more subordinates I gained and the more developed Grebarelka became. In turn, the larger the country grew, the more prosperous it became. Somewhere along the way, I started to enjoy all this like the demon I was and began actively leading the country. I’d loved a good fight since I was a boy, and I was always seeking to give Eliza a better life. And to give the child in her belly a better life too.

“Since you’ve already come this far, how about conquering all of Abyssland?”

“That might actually be a good idea.”

Eliza was probably joking, but I was serious. After this, Grebarelka continued winning and expanding its borders.

“Well met. Are you Gustav Baal? I’m Estoria Kranweltz, the queen of the vampires. Rumor has it that you’re the most powerful demon to have ever lived, but I won’t believe it until I see that strength for myself!”

It was around this time when a woman claiming to be the queen of the vampires showed up. Women were not a particularly rare sight on the battlefield, but my memories of this one were particularly vivid. Her exceptional battle prowess was one reason, yes, but what struck me the most about her was how she never stayed down. No matter how many times I beat her in battle, she always came back. I would turn around and she would already be coming at me again. She was exactly the type of woman I liked, with her stunning looks and unyielding spirit, but I mainly just thought of her as a weirdo who was more of a zombie than actual zombies.

One day, when we met again on the battlefield after having done so countless times, she howled, “Gustav, explain yourself! Who is Eliza?!”

She had heard the news that Eliza and I had gotten married.

“She doesn’t deserve you! There’s no way she deserves you! Only the powerful deserve to be with the powerful! Only I deserve to be with you! You’ve gone soft and I don’t want to see it!”

It seemed she was under the misapprehension that getting married had made me weak. I thought it was just like a battle junkie to worry about me that way. To prove her wrong, I wiped the floor with her again that day. I did the same the next day, and again the following day. However, no matter how many times we went through the same exchange, she never really understood.

“Eliza...must die. Hee hee hee.”

Somewhere along the way, her target shifted from me to Eliza. Her actions and behavior also turned erratic, and her laughter became unhinged. When I peered into her eyes, I thought I would almost get sucked in. This was when I realized that the larger Grebarelka became, the more enemies there would be who would come for not only me but my family. That there were enemies who would do anything to win.

After this, I took action so swiftly it surprised even me. I settled things with the woman I had fought so many times and moved Eliza deep into the castle to

conceal her before her belly became prominent. If word got out that she was with child, my enemies would be targeting my newborn child next. To prevent that from happening, I decided to hush everything up. I falsely declared that her sickness had gotten worse and that she needed to convalesce until she gave birth. It was a monumental task convincing Eliza to play along, but this was an absolutely necessary measure.

I had no doubt that my children would be absolutely gorgeous and look just like her. And sure enough, the twins she gave birth to were indeed absolutely, totally, completely adorable, so much so that even a saint would turn into a kidnapper upon seeing them. Seeing no other way, I had secret mansions built for the two of them. I swore to give them lives where they would never want for anything.

“Honey, loving the girls is fine and all, but you know you shouldn’t kill their boyfriends when they eventually start dating, right?”

“What are you saying?! All men are wolves! I won’t allow it! Never!”

“Aha ha, but that would mean Sera and Bell would have to live their entire lives as spinsters. Don’t you feel bad for them? At the very least, set up a condition that the candidates can meet you to gain your acceptance.”

“No can do. My beautiful daughters leaving me for another man—”

“Honey, set a condition.”

“Uh, yes, okay. Hmm, well...for starters, I won’t be able to bear it without giving the guy a serious punch in his face. So if they are still alive after taking that punch, they will, uh...”

“Get a passing mark?”

“I...grr, very well.”

“Did you hear that, Sera? Bell? Your chances of finding a husband in the future just went up by one percent!”

I resolved to give the punch everything I had and make it powerful enough to blow the scoundrel’s head off. Despite my reluctance in making this promise, I still felt a certain warmth in my chest. I’m not sure when it was that I started

turning into the Demon Lord. I thirsted for battle more and more by the day, and I headed out to fulfill that desire. And yet, strangely enough, whenever I visited my wife and children, those emotions were entirely left at the door. Even when I tyrannized Abyssland as a full-fledged Demon Lord, my place of respite never changed.

“It’s a promise, honey. If you break the promise, I’ll drink all the wine in our wine cellar!”

Eliza’s voice echoed in my mind as my memory faded and I woke up.



The tower that used to stand tall and forbidding here, built by the previous Demon Lord and his trusted retainers to run their trials, was now nothing but a mountain of rubble. Although I had done it on purpose, I couldn’t help but be taken aback by the destruction I had wrought. I had barely managed to survive thanks to Mel rushing over after the fight to heal me, but my neck still kinda hurt for some reason. As for Gustav...

“Damn.”

“You literally split him in two, honey.”

There was no other way to put it. The top and bottom halves of Gustav’s body had landed in two separate locations, partially buried under the rubble. And yet he was still breathing, displaying an astonishing vitality that more than lived up to his name as a king of demons.

When Melfina and I were working together to fix him back up, Gustav suddenly jerked awake, shouting, “Are you trying to kill me?!”

I mean, I was, but that was the nature of our fight and you were doing the same to me, so...cut me some slack, please? Look, we even attached the two halves of your body and now you look as good as new! There isn’t even any scarring; we did a pretty good job, if I do say so myself.

“Um...good morning, sir?”

“Tch.”

He clicked his tongue the moment our eyes met! Yep, this man—ah, demon—

is definitely Bell's father. The way he clicks his tongue and averts his eyes is exactly how she does it. But I'm in a really good mood right now, so I'll just laugh it off. Ha ha ha!

"Why did it have to be your mug that I first saw after waking from a nostalgic dream? Ugh, I can't tell if this is a good or a bad day."

Still looking off to the distance, Gustav heaved a sigh that was directed at me. Even though I had just healed him, now I felt like I was being told I shouldn't be there. *Ha ha ha.*

::Honey, can you stop laughing in your head? I know you're feeling great after getting to fight to your heart's content, but please read the room.::

Ha ha ha, I got chided by Melfina. Okay, sorry, I'll stop. I do want to build a proper relationship with Gustav. So I guess it's time to try talking to him properly.

"If it was nostalgic, does that mean it was a dream of the past?"

"Indeed. From a time long before you were born, I dare say."

Oh, he actually gave me a proper answer. I'm touched.

"It's a memory that I couldn't access no matter how hard I tried during my days as a Demon Lord. It has finally come back to me now that Bell resurrected me and freed me from that curse. But why did it have to be at a time like this?! Blast it all! I can't break a promise I made to Eliza!" Still looking away, Gustav clenched a fist so tightly he started quivering.

Uh, father-in-law? Your fist—it's bleeding!

"You! Boy!" Gustav suddenly jabbed a finger at me with such force that it could have shattered a boulder.

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"You survived after fighting me when I was fully enraged, yes?"

Is he checking that I'm still alive? I mean, I am, so that naturally means I survived, yes. The last blow that landed directly on my face did give me a complete makeover, and I may or may not have seen something eerily similar to the River Styx, but there was no sign of Melfina's blessing activating. Still, things

might have been bad if she had been any later in healing me. Apparently, I was foaming at the mouth, though I guess that still does count as not being dead.

“Yes, sir. I survived...somehow.”

“Tch. Okay. Pity your head didn’t get blown off. An enormous pity!”

“You didn’t have to say it twice...”

“I am a man who is honest with my emotions. As such, I am bad at hiding them. Bear with it.”

Hmm, he truly is a tyrant. He’s probably like this normally, even without the whole thing with me and Sera.

“Now, I’m truly reluctant to admit this, but you did pass the trials. So you have the right to wed Sera and Bell. Argh, just saying this is pissing me off. You mind if I punch you again?”

“Sir, people normally wait for an answer before doing what they’re asking permission for.”

The moment Gustav was saying the word “again,” his fist was already flying with every ounce of strength he could muster. Of course, it was much easier to dodge compared to the speed he demonstrated in the fight just now. I remained unhurt, but could tell the attack had more than enough power to cave my face in. *Gosh, what a careless person father-in-law is.*

“Tch. Now, I have a question for you. Not as someone giving out a trial but as a father. Answer me earnestly.”

“Understood, sir. But first, please let me clarify something. I’m only going out with Sera, not Bell. It sounded like you misunderstood, so I’m just making sure —”

“You mean to say that you’re merely playing with Bell’s heart?”

So wrong! That’s so not what I’m saying!

“Hmph, you didn’t have to tell me! I know it’s hard to tell what daughters are thinking at that age, but I can tell when she’s lying. She’s shy, so she averts her eyes when she does. And of course, Sera doesn’t lie at all!”

“I...see. Um, so you were seriously trying to kill me knowing all that?”

“A daughter’s boyfriend is her father’s bitter enemy! This is a fact that is true in all countries and cultures! Even if you aren’t in such a relationship with Bell, the fact that you got through the blessing I cast on Sera is—ARGH!”

“Can you not suddenly punch me while speaking?!”

Gustav’s punch missed again. *Right, so father-in-law is someone who doesn’t know how to hold back.*

“Huff, huff...”

“Pant, pant...”

Several minutes passed with me evading everything that Gustav was throwing at me. Unfortunately, as we had both been brought back from the verge of death just now, we didn’t have all that much stamina.

“You punk. You’re a punk, but make sure you make Sera happy! This is a royal decree! You hear me?!”

“I definitely will! I swear it!”

“ARGH! That’s enough of hearing your voice, you baldie!”

“I’m not bald, you scruffy beard!”

We had sunken to calling each other names, but I could tell that Gustav was starting to accept me, albeit reluctantly. *All right, that’s one goal down. Next is to have Sera—*

“Boy, it’s been bothering me this whole time, but...is that woman there your party member? I feel a power emanating from her that feels like the direct opposite of mine.”

“Oh, are you talking about Mel? She’s, um—”

As I struggled for the right words to introduce Mel, she placed her hands on my shoulders and, with a big smile, answered with what was fast becoming her go-to line. “I’m his legal wife.”

“Wait, Mel?!”

“Let me get this right, boy. You are only taking my precious daughter Sera as a

concubine and will not be wedding her? Come now, be honest with me. I won't be angry."

Those words don't match with the terrifying look on your face, father-in-law!

"It appears I must settle things with you once and for all, right here and now. Take up your sword! Struggle all you can! Know that your opponent is me, the great Gustav, your father-in-law! Approach with half-assed conviction and you will die!"

"Did you just... Understood, sir! Here I come!"

I pulled out two swords from Clotho's Storage as Gustav created a yanyuedao with his blood. *How silly of me to have been satisfied with the fight just now! I'm ashamed of myself as a battle junkie. I must now restore my reputation!*

"Heh heh heh, what is going on here?"

"Oh, are you members of the Four Demonic Generals? Nice to meet you. I'm Mel. Um, is this guy all right?"

"Ugh...ah! B-Bell-sama, not so dee— AH!"

"It's a chronic condition he has. Please don't mind—my lord?!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Viktor showing up with Sebasdel on his back and talking with Mel. The moment Gustav heard what Sebasdel was saying in his sleep, though, he immediately rushed over.

Oh, that pervert's done for this time.

Afterword

Thank you so much for purchasing *Black Summoner 10: The Empress Returns*. It's Doufu Mayoi here, the author who looks entirely innocent but has a pitch-black heart. Thank you so much to all the readers who are still following this series as it moves from web novel to printed pages. Your purchase means the world to me.

Can you believe we're at volume ten now? Volume. Ten. Who thought we'd get this far when this series first got published? Not me, at least! Talk about a miscalculation. Or, more correctly, a happy surprise. When I first got published, the web novel version only had enough material for five volumes. Even I have trouble believing that I got this far, especially because I know how much trouble I have sticking with one thing. I can't help thinking that all this was made possible only thanks to the readers' support. I also can't help thinking about how the manga serialization of my other series, *Blackiron Mage*, is starting under Comp Ace. I'm thinking, what if that got some love too? I have a lot of things that I think about every day.

The character depicted on the cover of the Big One-Oh volume is Shutola in her child form! A lot happened to her, and her vibe kinda took a one-eighty, but this is indeed her again after her first time on the cover for volume five! She's so adorable, even the goddess who finally got onto the cover of the last volume might feel envious. When is the goddess getting the cover again? Well, uh, it would be cool if that happened. Maybe when there's a chance...

That aside, hey, the story's setting has finally moved to Sera's homeland, Abyssland! With the introduction of characters who have such deep ties to the main cast and a father-in-law Kelvin will have to win over in many ways, there's sure to be plenty of ups and downs going forward. Personally, I was so moved to see Viktor's gallant figure actually drawn out. Thank you. Thank you so much! I— Oh, am I good on the page count now?

Lastly, in regard to the actual production of this volume of *Black Summoner*, I

want to express my thanks to Kurogin-sama and DaiXt-sama for drawing Shutola so cutely, my proofreaders, and of course, once more, all my dear readers.

With that, I hereby leave *Black Summoner* in everyone's warm hands, praying that we will meet again next volume.

Doufu Mayoi

■ KELVIN CELSIUS

■ 23 Y/O / MALE / DAEMON/ SUMMONER

■ LEVEL: 151

■ TITLE: GRIM REAPER

■ HP: 2,504/2,504

■ MP: 24,012/24,012 (+16,008)

SUMMONING CLOTHO: MAX MP -100

SUMMONING GERARD: MAX MP -1,000

SUMMONING SERA: MAX MP -1,000

SUMMONING MEL (ARTIFICIAL BODY):

MAX MP -5

SUMMONING ALEX: MAX MP -1,000

SUMMONING DAHAK: MAX MP -?

SUMMONING BOGA: MAX MP -1,200

SUMMONING MDOFARAK: MAX MP -1,200

■ STRENGTH: 1,506 (+640)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,314 (+640)

■ AGILITY: 1,831

■ MAGIC: 3,557 (+640)

■ LUCK: 2,349

■ EQUIPMENT

BLACK STAFF OF DISASTER (RANK S) MAD HOLY SWORD CLIVE (RANK S)

BLACK SWORD AKLAMA (RANK S) SKILL EATER (RANK S)

ASTARTE'S EMBRACE (RANK S) BLOOD PENDANT (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S) BLACK LEATHER BOOTS OF THE DIVINE
BEAST (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

MAGIC OVERCLOCK (UNIQUE SKILL)

PARALLEL PROCESSING (UNIQUE SKILL) NERVES OF STEEL (RANK S)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S) SMITHING (RANK S)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S) ARMY COMMAND (RANK S)

SCYTHE MASTERY (RANK S) SPIRIT (RANK S)

SUMMONING (RANK S) [AVAILABLE SLOTS: 2] HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK S)

GREEN MAGIC (RANK S) IRON WALL (RANK S)

WHITE MAGIC (RANK S) MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

ANALYZE EYE (RANK S) DOUBLE EXPERIENCE POINTS

FLIGHT (RANK S) DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK S) DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

DANGER DETECTION (RANK S) EXPERIENCE SHARING

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK S)

MIND'S EYE (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE GODDESS OF REINCARNATION DISGUISE (RANK S)

SKILL EATER (RIGHT)/ASSASSIN'S STRIKE (UNIQUE SKILL)

SKILL EATER (LEFT)/DUAL WIELD (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ SERA

■ 21 Y/O / FEMALE / DEMON BLOOD LORD / CURSED PUGILIST

■ LEVEL: 151

■ TITLE: EMPRESS

■ HP: 7,878/7,878 (+3,889) (+100)

■ MP: 8,408/8,408 (+4,154) (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 2,278 (+320) (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,877 (+320) (+100)

■ AGILITY: 2,182 (+320) (+100)

■ MAGIC: 2,551 (+320) (+100)

■ LUCK: 2,760 (+640) (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

ARONDIGHT (RANK S)

QUEEN'S TERROR (RANK S)

CLIP OF CAMOUFLAGE (RANK A)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

STRENGTHENED ADAMANTITE GREAVES (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

BLOOD DOMINION (UNIQUE SKILL)

BLOODBENDING (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)

BLACK MAGIC (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK S)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK S)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT DETECTION (RANK S)

SERVICE (RANK A)

DANCING (RANK S)

MUSICAL PERFORMANCE (RANK S)

FISHING (RANK S)

AUTO HEALING (RANK S)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK A)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK A)

SUPER LUCK (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE DEMON LORD

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

FORTITUDE (RANK A)

SPIRIT (RANK A)

IRON WALL (RANK A)

ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK A)



■ SHUTOLA TRYCEN

■ 18 Y/O / FEMALE / SAGE / PUPPETMASTER

■ LEVEL: 143

■ TITLE: PUPPET TACTICIAN

■ HP: 804/804

■ MP: 2,470/2,470

■ STRENGTH: 308

■ ENDURANCE: 321

■ AGILITY: 910

■ MAGIC: 3,081 (+640)

■ LUCK: 1,897

■ EQUIPMENT

GODDESS'S MAGI-THREADS (RANK S)

MONICA (RANK S)

GEORGIUS (RANK S)

DAMAGED GUARD (RANK A) X 25

FAIRY DRESS II (RANK S)

CLIP OF CAMOUFLAGE II (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

SHOES OF THE SPIRITS (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

PERFECT MEMORY (UNIQUE SKILL)

RETRIBUTIVE PERSUASION (UNIQUE SKILL)

PUPPETRY (RANK S)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK S)

ARMY COMMAND (RANK S)

MILITARY TACTIC (RANK S)

STRATAGEM (RANK S)

MAGIC ATTACHMENT (RANK S)

MAGIC CONSERVATION (RANK S)

COMPANIONSHIP (RANK S)

NEGOTIATION (RANK S)

ACTING (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

CONVERSATION (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS



■ BELL BAAL

■ 21 (+?) Y/O / FEMALE / DEMON STORM LORD / CALCITRIST

■ LEVEL: 173

■ TITLE: CONDEMNER

■ HP: 8,348/8,348 (+4,174)

■ MP: 10,396/10,396 (+5,198)

■ STRENGTH: 2,689 (+640)

■ ENDURANCE: 2,330 (+640)

■ AGILITY: 3,206 (+640)

■ MAGIC: 3,758 (+640)

■ LUCK: 2,894 (+640)

■ EQUIPMENT

CLARENT (RANK S)

PRINCESS'S DREAD (RANK S)

HALLELA BAGUE (RANK A)

CLIP OF CAMOUFLAGE (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

COLOR CORROSION (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)

GREEN MAGIC (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK S)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK S)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT DETECTION (RANK S)

TORTURING (RANK S)

DANCING (RANK S)

MUSICAL PERFORMANCE (RANK S)

AUTO HEALING (RANK S)

GUSTATION (RANK B)

FORTITUDE (RANK A)

SPIRIT (RANK A)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK S)

IRON WALL (RANK S)

ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

SUPER LUCK (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE DEMON LORD

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

DISGUISE (RANK S)



Bonus Short Stories

Viktor Seeking a Teacher

Sera was currently asking a favor of Efil in the kitchen of the Demon Lord Castle in Grebarelka. Viktor stood at her side, wearing a butler uniform and an apron with cute flower prints, bowing every bit as low as Sera was.

“And that’s why I’m begging you to teach Viktor! Efil, please!”

“I beseech you as well, Efil-san. This is something that I simply must do.”

“What?! Sera-san, please lift your head! You too, Viktor-san! I’m still not quite sure what is going on, but I promise to help to the best of my ability!”

“Really, Efil?!”

“Ku ha ha, you are every bit as kind as Sera-sama said, Efil-san. It is rare for me to feel this touched.” Despite not having eyes, Viktor made a tear-wiping gesture while expressing his gratitude. It was clearly an act, and Efil, who had once fought Viktor as an enemy, kept her guard up.

However, Efil could not simply dismiss this request—not when it was coming from Sera, whom she did trust. It also was true that the specifics of what was being asked of her had piqued her interest.

“Allow me to confirm the request. I am to teach Viktor-san how to make curry. The dish *is* the curry that we all know, yes?”

“That’s right!” Sera nodded. “The curry that Viktor makes is already the most delicious in the world. However, if you teach him your tricks, it would be the equal of giving a swordsman a famous sword, giving a fisherman a sturdy fishing rod, or giving Viktor an expensive frying pan! Viktor told me that he’s also impressed with your skills as a fellow chef, so I’m thinking that this would be a great opportunity for him to get even better!”

“Ku ha ha, curry is a dish that holds great sentimental value for the two of us. It might not be obvious, but I am quite excited at the moment.”

“I see.”

Although there was no visible change on Viktor’s face, as one chef to another, Efil could tell that he was truly looking forward to learning from her.

“Very well. Then I shall start by actually making the dish. As I go through the entire process, I will explain each step as I go along.”

“That is entirely fine with me. Feel free to start whenever you wish.”

“I’ll stay and watch too! Is that okay, Efil?”

“Of course. Viktor-san, I must say, I am quite impressed that not only do you know of this dish, but you’ve also made it your *prized* dish. Even I did not know of it until my own teacher taught it to me.”

“Ku ha ha, it was Sera-sama who discovered the recipe in an ancient text.”

“Aw, you remembered!”

Efil giggled softly at the exchange before applying herself to the cooking. A harmonious atmosphere filled the kitchen, and soon enough, the dish was done. That’s right, the curry was done.

“And that was the general process for making curry. Do you have any questions, Viktor-san?”

“Um, Efil? That’s...not curry. Wait, but a while ago... HUUUUH?”

“My apologies, Efil-san. Although you did use nearly the same ingredients, this dish is quite different from the curry that I know.”

“What?”

It was a while before Efil learned that “curry” in Abyssland referred to meat and potato stew.

Ruka Struggling in a Huff

Ruka, one of the battle maids in the service of House Celsius, was extremely dissatisfied about something. Of course, she found great meaning in her usual duties, and her relationships with her colleagues were going great. Beyond that, she had a solid roof over her head, delicious food, comfortable clothes, and a

generous salary. So, then, what was it that she was so unhappy about? The answer could be found when she was grumbling to herself in her room on one of her days off.

“Ugh! I even Evolved and everything, but why am I still an apprentice?! I’m already a full-fledged maid!”

Ruka was referring to the fact that despite having Evolved to maidkin, her class, as indicated by her Status, was still Apprentice Battle Maid. What made it even harder to swallow was that this was not an evaluation by Efil, her teacher and superior, but by whatever universal power-that-be that was automating such matters. For her, however, this was a matter as grave as life and death.

“Why is the word still there? I’m doing my job properly, and I’m not slacking off like Huba is! When I ask mommy, all she says is that I have to wait till I grow up and then it’ll go away by itself. Efil-sama is even worse; she just smiles and doesn’t answer! You know what? I’m gonna get rid of the title myself! That’s right, I have ideas!”

And so Ruka began her great big strategy in a huff. To start, during snack time, instead of asking for milk like she always did, she went for—of all things—black coffee instead!

“It’s so bitter! I can’t drink this!”

Less than several seconds in, her first plan fell through. Time to move on to plan two. A full-fledged adult would be able to stay up late! So Ruka would stay up until midnight!

“Oh no, I have to wake up early tomorrow to prepare breakfast! Gotta sleep soon!”

This plan did not even get put into action before it went into the bin. Next!

Third: pros can read any book they pick up, no matter how difficult! Without further ado, Ruka went to borrow a great book from Shutola.

“Hm? A difficult book? Um, you want a book that I find difficult?”

“Yep! Ah, I meant to say, yes! Please let me borrow your most difficult one!”

“Well, in that case, how about this one?”

“Um...what language is this?”

“It’s basically in Old Tongue, but the text has been encrypted, so you have to read it like you’re figuring out a puz—”

This plan, too, fell through due to Ruka being unable to even read the language the book was written in. After this, she continued suffering setback after setback, with none of her ideas working out.

“Was... Was I really just an apprentice all along?”

“Oh? Hello, Ruka, dear. You look down. What’s the matter?”

“Mommy...”

Ellie drew her dejected daughter into a hug.

“Mommy, I...”

“Oh, something bad’s happened to you, hasn’t it? Do you want to take a break with mommy? Efil-sama just baked a chiffon cake. Tell me what’s got you down while we eat it.”

“Efil-sama’s chiffon cake?! I want some! Let’s eat!”

“Look at that cute smile of yours. It’s almost like your troubles went away.”

“Troubles? What troubles?”

“It’s nothing, dear. Come now, let’s go.”

Ruka skipped off to where the cake was waiting, holding hands with Ellie and humming all the way. It would be quite a while before the term “apprentice” finally disappeared from her class name.

Melfina’s Shaved Ice

Summer was the season of scorching heat. People tried a variety of things in an effort to alleviate the heat just a little, such as heading to pools or beaches, making adjustments to their diets, or using cooling magic. The goddess living in the Celsius mansion was no exception. Even she, despite her noble and esteemed identity, and despite being worshipped by the Order of Rinne as their one and only deity, found the hot weather as unbearable as anyone else.

“It’s so hot...and I’m so hungry...but I’ve snacked a bit too much lately and used up my allowance for eating out. Of all days, the maids are out today, and only Huba stayed behind because she was made to clean as punishment for slacking off. Ugh...I can’t go on any longer. The people I can usually rely on to serve me snacks just when I want them are all gone. My body’s heating up beyond its limits, and my stomach’s so empty I can almost feel it from my back. Honey, please forgive your undutiful wife for passing away before you...”

Melfina had collapsed on the ground in a corner of the mansion from hunger and heat. Of course, she wasn’t actually on the verge of death. No, she was merely putting on an act to enjoy the chill of the ground on her skin. Thanks to Efil’s daily efforts, the floor was extremely clean, but that was no reason to lie down on it. And yet Melfina did not hesitate to do so. Here was a model example of a goddess who had fully lost herself to worldly pleasures.

“Phew, I’m now able to hang in there thanks to the coolness of the floor. I knew I could count on it to bring my temperature down. I have to thank Efil for always keeping it so clean. However, the problem of my rumbling stomach remains entirely unaddressed. Would there be any food in the kit— No, I must not! I’m a goddess, and I cannot sneak into someone else’s holy sanctuary to steal their food! Most importantly, I’m afraid of making Efil mad!”

There was an instance in the past when Melfina had stolen a bite and been punished by being made to skip dinner that day. It had been so agonizing and traumatizing that she had truly learned her lesson. That said, she found her current situation so dire that she was on the verge of throwing away her dignity as a goddess.

“In that case... In that case... Think, brain! Think of a food that even I can make, something that wouldn’t use up household ingredients, and something that’s perfect for getting through this heat! AH! I’ve got it!”

Melfina clapped her hands in an indication of her epiphany, then stood up and strode off with an alacrity that belied her languidness mere moments prior. Her destination was the training hall underneath the house. However, there was nothing in her hands, much less edible ingredients.

“I’m such a genius for thinking of this! Liquid Briar!”

A field of blooming flowers of ice spread out before her. This was the same spell that she had used in her practice match against Sera, the one that dealt damage to anyone who touched it.

“If I do this, and I grind it with Luminary...”

The next thing she did was take her beloved weapon Holy Lance Luminary out of Clotho’s Storage. Using her mastery with the spear, she bored into the ice, whittling down the ice flowers one by one. The sound of drilling filled the air as she applied herself to this task with single-minded determination. In the end, she was left with...

“I’m done! One Goddess Shaved Ice specially made by the Goddess of Reincarnation coming right up! I did such a great job even though this is my first time! I never got to taste Faanis’s famous pineapple shaved ice, so good on me for learning from past mistakes! What’s more, because this is made from my own spell, I can have as many refills as I want! I’ve discovered the first step to unlimited resources!”

Betraying all expectations, Melfina had been smashing Frozen Vajra Briar with Luminary to create a literal mountain of shaved ice. What’s more, she hadn’t considered for a second what would happen to the inside of her mouth should she eat it. Without hesitation, she started taking big spoonfuls, not seeming bothered in the slightest. She was not taking any damage whatsoever, which spoke volumes about just how tough the inside of her mouth was. There was still a problem, but it was for something else altogether.

“Ahhhhh! I forgot that I don’t have any syrup! This doesn’t taste like anything!”

Later, when Efil came home and found the large mountain of tasteless shaved ice that Melfina had created for no reason, she punished her again with another night of no dinner.

Alex’s Epiphany

Alex loved bony chops. How much did he love them? He loved them next after Rion. The way he categorized things was a bit broad, but this was either

number one or two on his list of favorite things. He always wanted to eat his fill of meat. However, Rion was always worrying whether he was eating too much, and Efil, who prepared his meals, had warned him again and again not to copy what Melfina was doing because it was dangerous.

“Awoo...” (I really want to enjoy meat heaven again...)

Big lovable ball of fur that he was, Alex was still a growing wolf. He always dreamed of huge feasts of very scrumptious meat.

“Arf. Arf... Arf, arf!” (Finding and hunting prey, I can do. But if I eat it secretly, I don’t know what might happen to me. Most likely, it’d make Rion sad. In the first place, raw meat is kinda bleh.)

As it turned out, Alex was surprisingly rational and a bit of a gourmet. If he and Melfina were put in a situation where they were equally hungry, he would have a much higher chance of staying calm and keeping the big picture in mind. After all, when hungry, the goddess would always follow her stomach without thinking about the consequences—for example, if she was presented with raw meat, she would likely just call it sashimi and dig in regardless. Alex fully understood that he should never follow her example. Only those with an iron-lined stomach and a will of steel could even hope to come close, but either way, this was not something for good little children to emulate.

“Grrrr...arf. Grrr...” (Instead, maybe I should think of a way to be satisfied with the usual amount I eat. But there’s no way such a convenient meth—)

The big canine rolled about, rubbing his smell into the ground while racking his brains. Suddenly, an epiphany came to him.

“Arf! Huff, huff, arf!” (OH! How about I try using that new power I got from Evolving?!)

When Alex had Evolved into a Vanargand, he had gained the ability to change his form and size at will by controlling his body as if it were a shadow. And just now, he had hit upon the idea that if he used this to shrink himself down to the size of a Chihuahua, the usual amount that was served to him would seem like a feast. Thinking about it, that was literally what Mdo did all the time when transforming into human form.

“Awooo!” (Meat!)

There was no time like the present, so Alex immediately sped off to the dining room. However, after giving it more thought, he realized that he had just finished lunch. Less than a minute later, he slunk back to his previous spot, ears and tail drooping with disappointment.

A Demon's Nightmare

The Kingdom of Doktoria was home to a large number of demons. A surprising number of them were old warriors who had achieved great feats on massive battlefields but had been forced to withdraw from the front lines due to injuries. That said, they were still more than energetic enough to take part in arm wrestling competitions, and their gathering for spirited matches where they put their money and pride on the line was a familiar sight in the capital.

Just as any other day, these active old warriors had once again come together for their festivities. Today, however, the mood was very different. Everyone had been their usual boisterous selves before the start of the competition, but silence now filled the venue. These demons, who were normally filled to bursting with energy, were now sitting in crumpled huddles on the ground with their heads hanging listlessly.

“Say...”

“What? Sorry, I don’t really feel like talking right now...”

“I mean, me too, but... Who the fuck was that?”

After a heavy pause, one person replied in an uncertain tone, “A, uh, girl with a strong arm who just happened to drop by hoping to earn some cash to buy food with?”

Everyone nearby whirled towards him and retorted in unison, “Like hell that’s all she is!” Judging by their reactions, they had all just lost to said “girl with a strong arm.”

“I mean, you’re not wrong, but still!”

“When she pushed my arm down, she was like, ‘And that’s for this

afternoon's snacks!"

"Ah, for me, it was, 'That'll go towards tonight's dinner.'"

"'Tomorrow's tea time' for me."

"'Tomorrow's 10 a.m. snack.'"

"'Tonight's dinn—' Wait, that's the same as yours! How much does she plan on eating?!"

This was a round-robin tournament where the loser had to immediately pay the winner after a match. In short, the girl had beaten everyone present while saying out loud what she was going to use their money for. Losing was bad enough, but the extra comments made them feel that much more miserable.

"Hold on, given how human she looked, don't you think she was actually some country's royalty slipping into town incognito?"

"You crazy? Why would a royal have to earn money for food at a place like this?"

"Maybe she's from a fallen royal family, then? Or...maybe she's the Hero from aboveground who came to Abyssland ages ago?"

"Ha! You kidding? Someone who only had food on the brain like her? You could see it on her face!"

"So true. What's so enjoyable about eating that much anyway? Blast it, guess there goes my day's earnings. What d'you all wanna do? Go another round?"

"Oof, I think I'm good. My right arm still hurts where she twisted it. I don't even have any money left with how many times I lost."

"Same here."

"C'mon, you guys are *that* worn out? Damn, well, we don't have the numbers. I guess that's it for tod—"

"Heyyyyy! We heard there's an arm wrestling competition here! Is it still going on? We want to take part!"

"S-Sera-nee, wait for meee!"

The old warriors turned to see a red-haired girl walking in and a black-haired

girl chasing after her.

A demon raised his voice in reply. “Hah! Looks like we’re not done yet after all! Perfect chance to get our money back. We just happened to need more contestants! You’re more than welcome to join! We won’t take responsibility if you get hurt, though!”

“Lassie, just a heads-up, but watch out, ’cus we ain’t in the best of moods right now! Don’t expect us to go easy on you!”

“Heh heh heh, don’t you come crying to us afterwards, girlies! Well, we would actually be troubled if you did start crying!”

In a great stroke of misfortune, it was someone from a fallen royal family and an overworlder Hero who had joined the demons. Just who ended up crying in the end?

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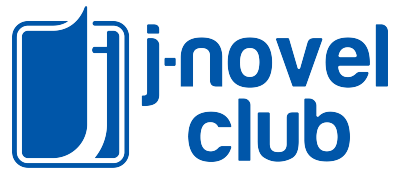
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Black Summoner: Volume 10

by Doufu Mayoi

Translated by Taishi Edited by Tess Nanavati

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by OVERLAP, Inc.

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2022

Premium E-Book